

HALLOWEEN SHRIEKS



TALES FROM THE MOST FRIGHTENING
NIGHT OF THE YEAR

HALLOWEEN SHRIEKS
An Anthology of Dark Stories

Edited
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COVER ART

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HALLOWEEN SHRIEKS

Neil Leckman

Cry out in the dark, laughing as you run
Costumed children out for a night of fun
All homes are lit except the house on the hill
Someone watches, looking for a soul to kill
The pots' a-boil as they wait
Getting anxious because it's late
Soon a boy leaves the crowd
He's shy and doesn't like it loud
He smells something sweet in the air
Takes away his fear and his care
Turning, he walks up the stair
Unaware someone waits for him there
That was the last time he was ever seen
Just another lost child, another Halloween.

HALLOWEEN WITH THE HARRINGTONS

Jeff Jones

“What a dump!”

“What part of derelict house didn’t you understand, Paul?” replies Sarah sarcastically.

She has a point, I suppose.

“Okay, what I should have said was; what we are we doing in a dump like this?”

“You know full well what we’re doing here, Paul; we’ve come to see if the stories are true.”

“On Halloween?”

I can think of a thousand places I’d rather be right now, like a party or a pub, any pub.

“Yes, Paul on Halloween, because that is when the haunting is supposed to take place. Besides, can you think of a better time to go ghost hunting?”

“Fair enough, but wouldn’t you have rather gone down the pub like everyone else? Even Jackie’s fancy dress party would have been better than this.”

“We do that almost every year. Anyway, it was Cathy’s turn to choose what we did this year and this is what she chose. You know she’s into this stuff, so don’t you go spoiling it for her.”

A waste of time is what it is. I can’t believe Ryan and Mark are playing along. Six grown-ups sneaking into a house that must be due for demolition pretty soon hoping to see a ghost – it’s ridiculous.

“So what do we do now, Cathy?” asks Lauren.

“Just sit down and wait I guess,” she replies, smiling and slinking to the dirty floor.

“Good job we brought some beer then,” says Mark, raising a couple of carrier bags into the air. “Don’t worry, girls, we’ve got wine, too.”

Maybe it won’t be so bad after all.

“Not only have we got alcohol, but we’ve also got these,” says Ryan, laughing. He pulls some monster masks out from his bag before putting a particularly hideous depiction of the Devil on his face. Everybody laughs.

My mistake; yes it will.

“So what’s supposed to have happened here, Cathy?” asks Sarah.

She glances towards me and I roll my eyes towards the ceiling; the damp, discoloured and potentially unsafe ceiling.

“Well, legend has it that on Halloween many years ago, Edward Harrington discovered that his wife was about to leave him for another man and in a fit of rage killed her and his two young children. Then he hung himself. Now they say that every Halloween their spirits come back and haunt the place. Nobody who’s bought the house since has stayed very long and several people went missing whilst living here in the 70’s and 80’s. Nobody’s lived in it for years, well, nobody except tramps and squatters. They say some of them have gone missing too, but no one knows for sure.”

“So what you’re saying is that at any moment we could be sharing our beer with any number of vagrants and drug users who might be hiding out in here? This night keeps getting better and better.” I couldn’t hide the sarcasm and drew a withering look from Sarah.

“Is he right, Sarah? Could there be tramps in here?” asks Lauren, nervously glancing around.

“I doubt it and even if there were I’m sure we scared them off when we arrived.”

“Come on, let’s get this party started,” says Ryan as he pops the first wine bottle and begins pouring it into three paper cups which he then hands to the girls. He then throws a can of beer to both Mark and me.

“So what should we do whilst we’re waiting for our friendly neighbourhood ghosts to appear?” asks Ryan as he sits down by the handful of candles one of the girls has brought along, presumably trying to make it more atmospheric.

With any luck one of them will knock a candle over and set light to the place so we have to leave.

“I suggest we all tell ghost stories,” replies Cathy smiling.

Oh, great!

“What if we don’t know any?” asks Lauren.

“Then I’ll tell them for you.”

I have a dreadful feeling that she knows quite a few and groan inwardly.

“Come on, Paul, it’s your turn.”

I heard the words but have no idea who spoke. Everyone is looking at me expectantly. Did I fall asleep? How long had it been? I surreptitiously glance at my watch and see that it’s nearly ten thirty. I must have dozed off. I wonder if anyone noticed. Damn, everyone’s still looking at me.

“Sorry, Cathy, I was miles away,” I wish, “what did you say?”

“I said it’s your turn to tell a ghost story.”

“I can’t tell a story about something I don’t believe in.”

“Don’t be a spoilsport, Paul, just have a go. Make one up if you have to,” urges Lauren.

I glance over at Sarah and, although she’s wearing her mask, I just know that she’s glaring at me.

“All right then.” They all cheer, thinking I’m entering into the spirit of the occasion, so to speak.

I take a deep breath and pause letting the tension slowly build, but then just as I open my mouth to speak, there’s a noise from upstairs.

Saved by the bell or perhaps more accurately, the creaking floorboard.

“What was that?” asks Sarah.

“Sounded like somebody treading on a creaky floorboard,” replies Ryan.

“There must be tramps here after all,” adds Lauren, shuffling a little close to Ryan.

I shake my head slowly and smile to myself as they all get to their feet and stare up at the ceiling as if they’ll be able to see through it.

“It’s just the house settling,” I say nonchalantly. They all look at me differently. The lads know that’s rubbish, whilst the girls want to believe that I’m right.

“There is another possibility,” says Cathy. We all look at her, but I know what’s coming. “It could be one of the ghosts.”

There it is.

“Bit heavy footed for a ghost, I think, Cathy,” says Sarah. “Sorry.”

“Think we’d better go and check it out, Paul?” asks Mark.

Anything’s got to be better than lying around on this hard floor telling stupid ghost stories. “Yeah, good idea, if only to reassure the girls.”

I glance over at Sarah and she smiles gratefully at me. That’s a few Brownie points I’ve clawed back.

As I get to my feet there's a loud bang from upstairs as if a piece of furniture's been knocked over. My mind conjures up the image of old man Harrington balancing on a chair in an upstairs bedroom before hanging himself.

Don't be ridiculous. If it's not tramps or whatever, it's probably a cat or perhaps even the wind.

"Me, Paul and Ryan will go and investigate, you girls remain here," says Mark, taking charge as always.

"Can't one of you stay here just in case?" asks Lauren, anxiously.

"All right, you stay with them, Ryan, me and Paul will go."

He looks over at me for confirmation and I just shrug my shoulders.

There's another bang followed by the distinct sound of heavy footsteps walking across the floor above us. Suddenly I don't find it so funny. Somebody is definitely up there. The thought of confronting some boozed up tramp who thinks we're invading his turf, isn't appealing. He could have any number of hidden weapons. I suddenly wish we'd had the foresight to check the place out as soon as we'd arrived. Safety in numbers and all that.

"I'm coming with you," says Cathy.

"I don't think that's a good idea, Cathy," I hear myself say.

"I'll be all right, Paul, don't worry. Besides if it is a ghost, I want to see it."

Whatever!

"Okay, but stay close by."

She nods dutifully.

A woman's scream rings through the house, making us all jump.

Not tramps then, not unless they're entertaining.

There's a series of bangs from upstairs which can only be the doors opening and slamming shut. Whoever it is, there's more than one of them.

Now I really don't want to go upstairs.

"Come on, Paul, let's go and find out what the Hell's going on," says Mark.

We begin to edge our way up the stairs. I'm silently praying that they're not rotten and going to give way. Mark is leading, I'm behind him with Cathy bringing up the rear. She must be really enjoying this and is obviously convinced that whatever is making the commotion is not of this world.

If there's a group of vagrants up here angry at our intrusion, I wonder how intimidating we'll look to them with plastic face masks on our heads. I stifle a grin and then as an afterthought I reach up and pull mine off, tossing it onto the floor.

Everything is silent when we reach the top save for the sound of our laboured breathing. Just as we start to make our way along the landing, though, several of the doors begin to open and shut before our very eyes. A small scream of surprise escapes my mouth and I'm suddenly grateful for the shadows hiding my embarrassment as my face flushes red. Mark turns round and looks at me. He looks nervous, perhaps even a little frightened. My mind tells me that it must be tramps or local kids trying to play a prank, but I have my doubts. I don't want to consider the alternative.

As quick as it had started, the doors all come to a standstill and we breathe a collective sigh of relief and continue along the landing. Suddenly the door at the end slowly swings open. The room beyond is pitch black and uninviting. Like moths to a lamp we start to make our way towards it.

The sound of children's laughter from behind startles us and we turn just as a door slams shut. I say nothing, but I'm sure I just saw a small boy and girl enter the room.

"How do you want to play this?" asks Mark. The light from the guttering candle gives his face an eerie drawn look. The candle is wobbling from where his hand is trembling.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Do you want to stick together or split up and cover more ground?"

I want to go back downstairs and join the others.

"I think it'll be better if we stick together," I reply, hoping that was the right answer. He looks relieved. Just then in the room to our left we hear the sound of something hitting the floor with a bang. I slowly open the door, holding a candle out before me, but I already know what I'm going to see. Lying on its side is a solitary wooden chair and dangling above it is a middle-aged man, a rope around his neck. My breath catches in my throat.

"What's in there?" asks Cathy leaning past me. I wait for the inevitable scream as she claps eyes on the dangling body, but nothing happens.

"Well what's in there?" asks Mark.

"Just some old chair lying on its side," replies Cathy.

I can't believe she can't see the rope or body hanging there, spinning slowly around.

“So what knocked it over?”

“Must have been the room where Harrington hung himself,” replies Cathy proudly.

You think! I’ve got to ask if only for my own sanity.

“All you can see is the chair?” I ask turning to face the others.

They both have surprised expressions on their faces and glance at one another.

“Why what else do you see?” asks Mark.

I turn to face the gruesome sight again but when I do all I can see is the fallen chair.

Is my imagination playing tricks on me or is there something else at work here?

“I say we split up and meet back up downstairs,” says Cathy suddenly and before we can protest she strides off down the landing towards the dark room at the end.

Mark and I look at one another. If we stick together now we’ll never live it down. Reluctantly we head in different directions; me into the room with the chair, Mark across the landing.

A few minutes later I’m back downstairs with the others; only Cathy is missing. The others are gathered around Mark and Sarah is giving him a hard time for leaving Cathy up there on her own. She’s not even looked at me so I’m obviously in deep trouble. I’ve no idea what Mark saw if anything, but I’m in no doubt that I saw the ghost of Edward Harrington. Shortly after entering the room with the fallen chair, the door slammed shut behind me. When I turned, I was confronted by the man who had previously been hanging from the rope. His face was contorted with hate. Without saying anything he had rushed towards me, murder in his cold eyes, but then he had simply vanished. Petrified, I had dashed out of the room and back downstairs without a passing thought for Mark or Cathy, something else Sarah will no doubt lambast me for later. I assume Mark had a similar experience upstairs or he’d never have left Cathy alone up there. Too old-fashioned and chivalrous for that.

“Where are the others, Mark?” Lauren is asking. He doesn’t answer. He looks terrified.

Others? Only Cathy is missing.

A piercing scream ricochets off the walls jolting us all into action; Cathy is in trouble.

We take the stairs in bounds, no longer worried about whether they're rotten or not and find Cathy knelt on the floor of the bedroom I'd been in a few minutes ago. She's sobbing profusely but thankfully appears unhurt.

"What's the matter, Cathy, what happened?" asks Sarah putting a comforting arm around her.

Very slowly Cathy lifts her head and meets Sarah's gaze. Then she turns and nods towards something in the corner of the room. We all lift our candles and peer into the darkness before screaming. Hanging from an exposed beam, its neck grotesquely twisted where the rope has broken it, hangs my body.

I try to speak, to say there's been some mistake, but nobody can hear me. Nor can they see me. Sarah wasn't ignoring me downstairs, she just couldn't see me.

Others!

My friends slowly approach my body and as they do I become aware of some shapes coalescing in the darkness to my left. One by one they take shape; a man, a woman and two little children. Others are appearing now, wearing all manner of clothes. They, like me, are presumably victims of Harrington's vengeful spirit.

As my friends lower my body, the shapes begin to fade and I with them.

UNDER THE TWINKLE OF FADING STARS

Dave Fragments

It was the Halloween of 1963 and I wanted to be Peter Pan, not just in costume but also in life. Under the twinkle of fading stars and the age of sixteen, my dreams were dashed. My brother came back from college and for a few short hours, I was a kid brother again. Gordy and I dressed as vampires and took a passel of kiddies door-to-door to scare the neighbors into giving treats and then delivered the kids home. We ended the night on Cemetery Hill high above Union Hollow, our small Appalachian town.

“This is the night of nights. The night above all others when we take to the dark places, to the graveyards, a night we speak to the dead for the dead are the guardians who keep the world safe against demons.” Gordy circled the stone bench where we sat, waving his homemade cape behind him like a torero. Then he stretched his hand out toward the town. His arms and shoulders rippled with the muscle he’d added during the time he was away.

“Worse, tomorrow, zits will bloom and I’ll hate me,” I said, carefree and responsible for nothing in that fine, autumnal night. The great swathe of the Milky Way lit the moonless sky while a crispy cool breeze brought the smell of autumn.

“The watch lights dim, turning red to gray and yellow to white. Only the stars remain to illume fateful night. Oh peaceful night, the night when Damned Rebels rise, the night the dead will walk the earth, make tomorrow happen,” Gordy said. I was like “What?”

Those were the days when I had the luxury to believe in perpetual childhood. I'd convinced myself that there was no heaven or hell, angels or demons, supermen or vampires, Godzilla or Mothra. Those were Gordy's fantasies, his visions, his stories to weave, dreams to spin. Before he left, we decided that he would create scary Saturday night movies. Yet, I was too afraid to speak out and deny his words. I was afraid that some errant angel from the fanatical Middle Ages or some moldy ancient Iron Age deity would take offense and throw lightning or boulders or curses my way.

“It’s only some high clouds blocking the Milky Way. I don’t believe in that superstitious stuff.”

“There are no heathens in foxholes,” Gordy said. I took out my fake fangs and laughed. He couldn’t have been serious.

"Atheists, not heathens," I said before changing the subject. "Did you see the last Outer Limits? Ma walked in on the beginning and threw a fit. She says I'm too impressionable and that's why I have nightmares and goofy dreams." Gordy gave me a withering stare.

"Ma baby's you. That guy started killing people with his mind, a letdown. When villains spout hellfire and throw flaming brimstone at you, that's when you worry and before you deny it. Spike, they do spout fire."

"Light me." I shook two cigarettes out of a pack and handed one to Gordy. Cupped hands hid the tiny fire as if someone would see. We sat in silence, devouring candy, smoking, watching the lights of the odd car enter a garage or house lights turning from a steady yellow to blue flickers of late-night TV. Brothers, enjoying each other's physical presence, or so I wished it would be.

An odor crept into the breeze, a smell like yesterday's burnt barbecue grille, last night's leftover bones, a goat-like ammoniated smell.

"Did you fart?" I said. I was one month from my sixteenth birthday and farts were still giggly fun. Gordy gave me a much too serious, adult look. I'd been getting that look recently from parents and teachers. The world wanted me to give up my carefree childhood and become a young adult.

"Spike, do you believe in ghosts, demons, werewolves, vampires, all that?" Gordy asked. I felt the air crackle with anticipation. This was that grown up and responsible conversation that I hoped was another year or two away. I sputtered, unprepared, trying to find the right answer before I decided the truths I wanted to guide my adult life.

"That's all make-believe and superstition," I said.

The clock on the town hall tower opened its doors to let the statues prance around. It was two minutes of soul-sucking cuteness where buggy-eyed carved soldiers and painted-plaster maidens danced a fake minuet until the twelve strokes of midnight after which, they flopped on each other, wasted in the smiles of adults and the scorn of uncute kids. Every kid in Union Hollow hated that clock and its mantra. "Midnight and noon, midnight and noon the clock goes round and round and the dancers mark our time."

"What if there's another world, an intersection of reality and fable?"

"Frankenstein and Dracula aren't real. They're figments of some writer's imagination," I objected. He flicked the cigarette away and hugged me.

"Dear little brother, pray they remain in hell. Pray you never meet anything that evil." Still holding me, Gordy made swirling movements with his hands. "The Seven Sisters have risen in at the appointed time. The Sentinel lies dead. The Fallen Ones desire dominion over the earth." The stars above us twinkled, faded and moved into Gordy's hands like he was wrapping up sparkly gauze. His cape grew behind him like a set of wings. Blue-white auras of the dead - ghosts, spirits, and wraiths - flowed from their graves. I buried my face in his chest, hoping he would make it go away. Instead, he addressed the ghostly hoard.

"The Morning Star and his minions batter the gates. Mankind seeks the help of the dead to seal the most ancient of paths," he said and the dead answered in many voices. My heart beat wildly. Gordy tightened his hug in an attempt to reassure me. He continued to speak to the dead.

"Nine times the space of days they fell in vile chaos to the Lake of Fire, prepared for their damnation, their universe of death, by their disobedience. In disobedience, they created sin. In rebellion, they created evil. For their actions, they were banished from the light."

A second time, a multitude of voices spoke their Amen. I peeked out to see many streams of ectoplasm flowing to the cemetery, an uncountable number of ethereal shapes, moving along the roads, over the hills, and from the horizon.

"The forces of Hell gain strength. Their shame is eternal damnation for rebellion against the Lord of All Creation. They seek to breach the gateway and abandon the Lake of Fire. The living and the dead stand between the dark and the light. My friends and allies, do you reject the dark lord?"

"In all his forms, in all his acts, in all his plans, we reject him," the many voices answered. I put aside my fears and stood, not cowering or hiding behind my brother. He pushed my shoulders back and made me stand for the spirits to see.

"There's so many ghosts," I said. Gordy didn't answer directly. His words to the crowd spoke volumes.

"The old Sentinel has died. The new Sentinel stands before you ready to ward the gates against the damned." His voice resonated in the night air.

"Are we going to die?" I spoke in a soft voice.

"Not tonight but sometime in the future," he said; his voice equally soft and gentle.

The dead formed a building around us, laid ethereal stones to form a foundation, thick walls, buttresses, arches, steeples and altars. The new basilica faced east. Its transepts aligned north to south, and its sanctuary celebrating the rising sun.

“Spike, listen and learn. The laws of the universe demand that a sentinel stand at the barrier between the heaven and hell, light and dark, the sheep and the goats. Without the sentinel, the forces of evil will destroy the gate and all creation.”

Through the roof of the spectral basilica I could see the stars, a strange trick of disembodied entities that both existed and had no substance. Winds from the four corners of the sky raced through the structure, whipped up my clothing and stinging my face. In the crossings of the spectral cathedral a black portal appeared.

“When did the God of Creation get laws that control him and won't someone see a few million ghosts gathering in our graveyard?”

“No and No. The Almighty didn't create the universe. The Universe created a Lord of All Creation and made the rules for everyone to live by. It's a matter of perspective like chickens and eggs. The Sentinel came later to guard the gateway to Hell. This basilica exists in the realm of the dead.” He waved to the spectral walls around us and then pointed to the portal in the crossings. My brain struggled to fire on all cylinders. “Behind that is Hades, the realm of all things evil, perverse and monstrous, a world of hate beyond imagining. Occasionally, abominations and unutterable nightmares seep out.” The black doors pulsed like a heart and grew larger. I could feel heat emanating from it. I stood, peering deep into that darkness, wondering, fearing, doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream. I struggled to understand.

“This is the realm of the dead? Does that mean we're dead?” I said. Gordy looked frustrated.

“Heavens, no. The sentinel is only allowed to spend year and a day in the realm of the dead without contact from the living. If you visit me here in the graveyard before day 366, I'll live another year and the Gates of Hell will remain closed. Do you think you can do that?”

I never imagined a situation like this. Gordy had gone to an overseas study program at a nondescript university and came back muscled-up like a bodybuilder. Instead of jock-arrogant, he was quiet and spooky. He had organized this Halloween outing with the kiddies with a purpose. I went

along with it because I wanted once again to bask in the presence of an older brother. What he engineered was my first adult decision that would more than save his life, it would save the world.

History books will not relate this event because human history rests on the stories of victors, which is not truth. I had suffered the dream of Peter Pan and never getting older. I tried to live a pipe dream and a lie. What gives life to the whole misbegotten mad lot of us, drunk or sober, is the altruistic and chilling sacrifice of one man or woman. Deep in my thoughts, I found my path up the hill of life and came to understand that without me, when the clock finished striking midnight, when the carved figures stopped dancing, there would be no sixteenth birthday, no party, no candles, no songs, and no gifts. My next words to my brother contained the salvation of man and the burden of manhood.

“I’ll do whatever you ask,” I said.

“Good. When the shit hits the fan and all of Hell breaks loose, don’t move from my side.” His eyes moved to the black gates in the crossings of the basilica. Fire sprouted as the lock gave way and the gates opened. Sulphurous flames burst forth and burning rocks arched into the sky. The spectral basilica trembled. Gordy took a deep breath, raised his right hand to the sky, and leveled his left hand at the disturbance in front of us.

“Hear me, Fallen One, return to the dwelling made for you. Hear me, Betrayer, return to horrors of the infernal world prepared for you and your followers. Thou who brought death into the world are damned to live in adamantine chains and penal fire till time itself ceases. This is the judgment of the Universe.” His words echoed into the vast deep of space-time and the host of spirits answered with a mighty Amen.

The earth under our feet trembled and heaved. A three-headed horned beast, breathing fire from its mouths, eyes brilliant like a red sun, body more akin to a dragon than a man, rose from the blackness. The fires of Hell exploded around its body, scorched its sides and consumed its flesh as fast as it was restored. Heat like a blast furnace blew skyward. The leviathan grew until it towered over us.

Then it spoke and I knew what fear lies beyond reason and experienced the full force of the evil that lived below. Without Gordy at my side, I would have been lost. Its voice seduced the mind, appeased the will and made the heart ache.

“And who issues such a command? A puny human? A solitary speck of dust in the immensity of creation?” it demanded.

“By all creation, the universe commands you return to the place prepared for you. The souls of the dead cry out for your return to Hell. Seek not the realm of the living for thou art damned.” Gordy moved both his arms and hands to the sky. The stars of the Milky Way swirled above and coalesced into the shape of a flaming sword. Again the beast from the depths spoke.

“Foolish man.” Beastly claws on strong limbs reached for us. “I who was once the prince of Thrones and Powers, who led the embattled Seraphim to war; I who was once cloaked in transcendent brightness and outshined all others, outshined even creation; I, who was once Commander of all Watchers, favored of the Almighty and despoiler of the daughters of Eden, will see you dead for your impotent and tiny threat. I will devour your heart and mind.”

Gordy pulled his closed fists down and the vast energies of the universe flowed into his hands.

“Die once again and be damned forevermore to the realm created for you!” The sword of transcendent energy thrust forward and blasted the damned creature, driving the Fallen One back through the gateway, and sealing the gateway with a blast whiter than a thousand suns and as brilliant as the instant of creation.

When I opened my eyes, I stood in the dark graveyard. The clock in the middle of our town, the despised clock with the stupid dancing puppets, rang the twelfth teller. It was never a more mundane and welcome sight. Midnight had come and gone. Mere minutes passed and the world was saved. I saw no ghosts, no spirits, no spectral cathedral. The autumn breeze, chill and crisp, blew past my face.

“Gordy?” I said, barely daring to breathe.

A blinding light shone from behind me. I held my hands to my eyes and turned. As the light dimmed, I felt Gordy's hand on my shoulder. He stood before me, marble white beyond pure, radiant, transcendent. He wore wings as magnificent and as insubstantial as the light of the stars themselves.

“It is finished. The world is safe again,” he said.

I lost it. I broke into tears, hugged him and wept my heart out. All my cynical skepticism and doubts were swept away in those tears. When I

stopped, we were seated on the stone bench at the top of Cemetery Hill with our bags of candy begging to be eaten. He wore the stupid vampire costume we wore trick or treating and, although Union Hollow was unchanged, I knew his sacrifice was not a figment of my imagination.

“All that was real?”

“Real as it gets.” He unwrapped a candy bar and bit it.

“But you had—”

“Wings. One day, I'll show you the celestial realm but not today. You need normalcy and perspective.”

“You said you would die if you stayed there.”

“Not so much die as not be able to return to Earth. Each year, I'll come to this bench when you summon me. If you go trick or treating with a bunch of kids and then come here, no one will suspect. Do that and I will live another year. Mankind and the world will abide and prosper.”

I thought for a long time. He'd just stood rock-solid against the Gates of Hell and prevailed - without question, without doubt, without fear. It was my turn to grow and be a man. Tonight, I knew what that meant.

“I never understood that strange Greek story you made me read. Now I think I do. It's the struggle that fills a man's heart with joy. You've become the most powerful man in the universe like Sisyphus. That's why he's happy and not a fool.”

I thought I was profound.

“And all I want is Ding Dongs and Twinkies and those Mars Bars and Sweetarts but no candy corn. I despise candy corn.” We laughed at each new piece of candy.

My zits didn't bloom the next day and I really wasn't the angry or rebellious or sullen child after that night. A year later, I organized a Halloween party for the children of Union Hollow, complete with a parade to the graveyard. Each kid got a big bag of candy and went home thrilled. I told the kids that one bag must remain for the ghosts of the cemetery and they winked and agreed with smiles. They were in bed by ten PM, happy. At midnight, I delivered the bag to Gordy and we had a feast. The lark's singing loudly. Lucifer's in his Hell, all's right with the world.

ONE MORE PIECE

Dusty Wallace

Just one more piece, the little boy said
With candy and chocolate all over his bed.

If you eat one more piece, then you'll explode,
Or spend all tomorrow on the commode.

But this one is little, and sugar free.
C'mon, Dad, how bad can it be?

If you eat one more piece then you'll explode,
Or spend all tomorrow on the commode.

But it's filled with vitamins, minerals and fruit,
The healthiest piece of my Halloween loot.

If you eat one more piece then you'll explode,
Or spend all tomorrow on the commode.

I just turned eleven. I'm in middle school.
Why do I always have to follow the rules?

It's getting late; put it back in the bag.
Then go to bed and quit with the nag.

Okay, Dad. I love you, good night.
No kind of candy is worth such a fight.

Sweet dreams, kid, I love you too,
and I always will, despite what you do.

Later that night, he woke to a sound.
Just his pet hamster messing around.

He saw the candy on his night stand.
Soon it sat in the palm of his hand.

The wrapper glittered, a shiny gold foil,
The color that's worn by medieval royals.

The candy he swallowed was shaped like a ball.
The boy exploded all over the wall.

HALLOWEEN TEA AND JASMINE INCENSE

Ron Koppelberger

Hidden amongst the rows of ancient houses, tumble down and ramshackle, lay the tiny abode of Stewart Sparks and his thirteen cats. The perception was that Stewart was insane and in some semblance of convulsive madness. The truth was, in fact, Stewart was an amazing liver of life and all it had to offer.

The tiny kitchen smelled of jasmine incense and the table was set for tea, Halloween tea and bony skeleton cookies. Served in perfect portion, “One for you and one for me, darling spirit.” he whispered in loving calm craving. The jasmine incense burned with an orange glowing tendril of mist and smoke, the aura was perfect and the ambiance was a gentle coquet in the rapture of what would be, what had to be. Stewart sang and danced in desires of elder need and Halloween celebration. The air became a thick veil of gossamer webs and the sky above Stewart’s house turned a blazing pumpkin orange, the figure of a dream came to life before his delighted eyes.

“Greetings and guffaws, lights and laws, may the spirit of All Hallows Eve be with yer soul and spirit, as ye hear it, be young at heart and may you start the youth of a new day in this, the Halloween way!” he sang and shouted.

Stewart fell to the floor and when he awoke he was in the cradle of youth, vigorous and enchanted by the phantasms of Halloween ghost.

True to this day he is often seen in the guise of an old man trick-or-treating in gleeful harmony with the night’s wonder. The legend of Stewart Sparks says that if you see him on All Hallows Eve, look deep into his eyes and perhaps you’ll find a measure of youth by the glee of a child’s whisper and the cry of tiny Halloween adventurers in costumed array with the evening sky and the dream that is the substance of old St. Sparks and candy corn sweet.

STINGY JACK, THAT SCOUNDREL

C.A. Kerr

The first cut was too shallow. Ruby tried again, sinking her knife in deeper, piercing the flesh until she felt the tip of the knife slide into the pulpy mess in the middle of the pumpkin. Perfect. She carved her way around, making an uneven but acceptable lid. Ruby pulled it out and cut the fibrous threads from the bottom. She considered saving the pumpkin seeds to roast later but instead tossed them, and everything else from the pumpkin, into a gooey pile on a newspaper. She absently read the pieces of the classified section visible under the strings of orange as she continued to clean the inside of the pumpkin.

Ruby loved late October. Loved watching the last remnants of autumn slowly surrender to winter: trees being stripped bare from gusting winds, their crisp, dead leaves losing their vibrant colours as they slowly blanketed the ground in a wet, brown slop. Loved the cold nights where brittle twigs snapped underfoot with little effort, sending warnings through the clear, crisp darkness.

And loved Halloween.

But this year felt different. There was a different atmosphere to this last day of October: everything was hidden under snow. There had been flurries on and off all day—unusual for late October. The atmosphere was more magical, like the first snow of the season, a blanket of clean, white sparkles—like Christmas—then a dreary, decaying Halloween night. She watched the snow through the kitchen window, caught in strong gusts, orange under the yard light. Her Halloween decorations hanging from the porch were covered in snow: it was caught in fake spider webs and the large plastic spiders now supported a cold, white weight. It reminded her of the one time trick-or-treating as a child in weather like this, her homemade costume hidden beneath a bulky winter jacket. She didn’t remember anything about the spooky night other than being cold and miserable.

But the weather didn’t matter. She didn’t expect anyone to visit her house for trick-or-treating. It had been two years since she’d had any trick-or-treaters—it was one of the downsides to living in a secluded farmhouse in the middle of nowhere. Her driveway was a half-mile long and it was difficult to see her house from the road. Her only visitors over the years had

been the neighbour's kids but they were now grown. But she had a stockpile of treats waiting, just in case. She always bought the good treats—mini chocolate bars—because she knew she'd be the one eating them anyways. She grabbed one from the pile and ate it before returning to her pumpkin.

As she continued to clean it she thought of her grandfather. He would be proud that she still carved a lantern for Stingy Jack every year: the soulless, wandering drunk of the old country, so he could find his way through the long nights. It was her grandfather who had fostered her interest in Halloween with his stories from Ireland. It was the simple imagery of his tales that struck her imagination, like the story of the Stingy Jack: the simple drunk who had managed to trick the devil. She could almost hear her grandfather now, telling the story:

Have I ever told you the story of Stingy Jack, Ruby? I have? Well, I'm going to tell it to you again. A long time ago, before I was born, there was an evil man named Stingy Jack. He had a reputation, this Jack. He had a reputation for drink. And he had a reputation for being a mean son of a bitch. He had no friends, no family, no home—he wandered from village-to-village, stealing and fighting his way through life.

One night, the Devil had overheard some men at a pub talking about another man sitting in a corner at the bar. They called him Stingy Jack and according to these men, he was as bad as a man could be. The Devil was curious—he wanted to meet Stingy Jack, to see if he was as mean as they claimed. So later that night, the Devil followed Jack into the countryside as he wandered drunkenly through a field. The Devil laid down in front of Jack and even in his drunken state Jack instantly recognized the figure before him. He thought this was it—the Devil had come to take his soul. But he wasn't ready to die. He managed to convince the Devil to let him have a final drink before he was taken to hell. The Devil agreed and they walked back to the pub together.

Jack savoured his final drink, taking a long time to finish. When he was done, he explained to the Devil he had no money to pay for the drink and requested that the Devil pay his tab on his behalf. The Devil was taken aback by the request—who asks a favour from the Devil? But he was impressed by Stingy Jack. Not many men would have the audacity to request such a thing. But just before paying the tab Jack had another request of the Devil: for him to turn into a silver coin so he could use it to pay the bartender. A silver coin? It was madness—the Devil couldn't believe this

second request, but again, he was amused by Jack. So he turned himself into a large silver coin. Instead of paying his tab, Jack slipped the coin into his pocket and left the bar.

What the Devil didn't expect was to be tossed into a pocket with a crucifix. Although Jack was a bad man he was a religious man, as most were in those days. Because of the crucifix, the Devil was unable to turn back to his original form. He was stuck being a silver coin. In order to get himself out of this mess, Jack made a deal with the Devil: he would remove the crucifix from his pocket in exchange for his soul. The Devil agreed and Jack set him free.

Some years later, Jack died. He wasn't very old, but the years of hard living and hard drinking had taken their toll. So Jack made the journey to heaven. He waited for his turn to see St. Peter at the gates of heaven but St. Peter denied him entry. He was too bad a person. So Jack had no choice but to make the journey down to hell. When he arrived, the Devil laughed in his face. He wasn't welcome in hell—and besides, they had made a deal—the Devil could never have his soul.

So Jack was forced to spend the rest of eternity wandering the night between heaven and hell. He had complained to the Devil that he had no light for his night time wanderings so the Devil tossed him an ember from Hell. Jack kept the ember in a hollowed out turnip—carved with the Devil's face—which forever lights his way in the darkness.

“This is for you, Jack,” Ruby said to her empty kitchen, starting the incision for the first of two triangle eyes.

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Ruby admired her pumpkin with the kitchen lights off: two triangle eyes, a crooked, evil mouth with sharp, pointed teeth. The candlelight flickered gently inside, warming the pumpkin in an orange glow and illuminating its mouth and eyes.

“Well, Devil,” she said to the pumpkin, “I hope Jack can find you so he can carry you around tonight”. She flicked the kitchen lights back on. “As if he needs your guidance, though, he seemed to get into enough mischief without you”.

She cleaned the table and scraped the pulp from the newspaper into the compost. She then got ready for Halloween, decorating the table with

snacks and tiny plastic spiders. For the final touch she set the pumpkin in the centre of the table. Normally she kept the pumpkin on her front porch as a beacon for the trick-or-treaters, but with the flurries she thought her candle would burn out in no time, so she kept it inside. She flicked the lights off one last time to admire her pumpkin.

In the dark, she noticed one eye was much smaller than the other. Dissatisfied, she got the knife out of the sink and walked to the pumpkin. She took the lid off and steadied the vegetable with her hand, her fingers resting inside. With only candlelight to guide her she began to carve into the eye.

“Damn!” She dropped the knife and pulled her free hand away. She had sliced into the flesh of her index finger.

*Tasty.*

She switched the light back on and ran to the sink to wash the wound. She heard it this time, louder: *tasty*.

She spun around. The pumpkin sat on the table, its lid off, but the grimace on its face had turned upwards into a slight smile. Or had she carved it that way?

Thinking she was imagining things she wrapped her finger in a piece of paper towel and searched the cupboards for a bandage.

*Got any more of that for me, Ruby?*

Again, she spun around. She definitely heard that. The pumpkin’s grin was wider, the skin around the edges of its eyes wrinkled, expressive. The pumpkin was teasing her.

“Any more of what?” she asked, secretly hoping the pumpkin would answer her. She knew it wouldn’t. The shock of cutting her finger had probably just set her imagination wild. She wasn’t crazy—you couldn’t all of a sudden go crazy. Or could you? No, she was fine. She was thinking straight.

*Blood.*

“Blood?” Ruby said, surprised at both the request and answer. The pumpkin was definitely talking to her.

*Yes, blood.*

“Sorry, I don’t have any more to give”.

Sure you do. You’re full of blood.

“And why do you want my blood?” Ruby asked, still surprised she was having a conversation with a pumpkin. Its expression hadn’t changed: full

grin, somewhat menacing.

*Well you know that story your grandfather told you about Stingy Jack?*

“How you do you know about that?”

*I’m Jack, and the story is wrong. It’s true that the Devil gave me an ember from hell. It’s true that I carved his face into a turnip and put the ember inside and started wandering the earth with the lantern as my guide. But that’s not where it ends. One night it was very, very cold. It was a night like tonight—snow came out of nowhere. So I crawled inside my turnip and got trapped. I did get banished to hell after all—a personal hell. So every time someone lights a pumpkin or turnip, or whatever vegetable they carve the Devil’s face in, I get trapped inside. There’s a way I could get out, but I need your blood.*

Ruby considered this.

“I don’t believe you”.

*I’m talking to you from inside a pumpkin. How else did I get in here?*

“You said you got trapped inside a turnip. Your turnip”.

*Turnip, pumpkin It doesn’t matter. The Devil decides where I go.*

“There are probably thousands of jack-o’-lanterns lit right now, at this moment. So how come you’re only in this pumpkin?”

*Ask the Devil, I don’t know.*

“And if I blew the candle out, you’d disappear?”

*Don’t do that!*

“Why not?”

*You’re the first person in a long, long time to have heard my cries for help. You can’t leave me now!*

“Cries for help? You wanted my blood!”

*I wanted your attention.*

“This is getting too weird,” Ruby said, not to the pumpkin, but to herself. She rushed to the table and put the lid back on the pumpkin. She lifted it up and carried it outside, setting it down on the porch. She wouldn’t extinguish the flame, but would let the Halloween night decide.

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She tried having a normal evening. She made herself some supper but her gaze kept drifting out the kitchen window. The pumpkin’s flame burned steadily, defiant. She did the dishes, occasionally looking over her shoulder

toward the door, the pumpkin's glow visible. She ate some Halloween candy. She was going to watch a horror movie on the television but instead went outside and retrieved the pumpkin.

It's freezing out there.

"Sorry. I—"

You tried to kill me.

"You're already dead."

You know what I mean. So you're curious about me?

"I guess so. I've never experienced anything supernatural before".

Give me more of your blood and I'll show you something really supernatural.

Ruby considered this. She was curious.

I just need more blood. If you can give me more of your blood I can come out of this damn pumpkin.

"How much do you need?"

Enough.

Ruby felt herself walking to the dish rack to get the carving knife. She knew what she was doing was irrational but she did it anyways. She was too curious. She took the lid off the pumpkin, held a finger over the top and pricked her finger with the knife. A small drop of blood appeared on the wound and she squeezed it out.

I'll need more. Much more.

Ruby squeezed her finger again and put another drop of blood into the pumpkin.

I don't think you understand me. I need a lot more of your blood.

She drew the blade across the palm of her hand and a small line of blood poured steadily from the wound.

Now we're talking.

"So what happens now?" Ruby asked.

The pumpkin was silent.

"Jack?"

The blood was now flowing in multiple streams over her hand, down the length of her fingers, falling from her fingertips.

You just keep filling me up with blood and I'll let you know when to stop.

And she did.

THE MONSTER SLAYER

Kevin L. Jones

It was Halloween, the very last Halloween. The gates of Hell had been thrown open and beasts from the pit now roamed freely over the face of the earth. Thomas's town had been overrun by creatures of darkness. Everywhere he looked he saw living skeletons, witches, werewolves, vampires and legions of zombies. Although God had seemingly abandoned this world to the hordes of evil, Thomas would not give in, he would fight. He readied his rifle, pistol and knife for the night's hunt. He was well-armed and had the will to use these tools. Soon the minions of Hell would feel his wrath.

Before departing from his home he spent a moment in silent prayer. He knew that the odds against him were staggering and that he would probably not live through the night. He beseeched his maker to give him the strength to die well. As he crept from his home out onto the deserted street he chambered a round into his rifle. He watched as the sun began to sink below the horizon. Soon darkness would fall and then the legions of Hell would swarm through the streets. Slowly he moved through his neighbor's yards careful not to give himself away.

Finally he made his way to a vacant field with a stand of trees in its center. This would make a very good firing position indeed. He climbed up onto the tallest of the trees and looked down his rifle sight. The sun had barely set and already the monsters had begun to slither out from their places of concealment. He took careful aim at a small shuffling zombie. Thomas held his breath and squeezed the trigger. His shot had been true. His round had passed through the undead thing's skull, killing it instantly. He next drew a bead on a snarling werewolf. He didn't know if his bullets would have any effect given that they were not made of silver but he figured he had to at least try. His rifle slammed against his shoulder as his bullet hurtled across the field and felled the beast. Thomas smiled. Perhaps his task would not be as difficult as he had feared. These monsters were not anywhere near as hard to kill as Hollywood would have him believe.

He decided to move, his position had been compromised. A howling mob of creatures from Hell were converging on the stand of trees. He leapt down from his hide and ran towards a small strip mall. Its parking lot

swarmed with creatures from the infernal regions. He pulled a handgun from his waistband and fired into the gathered monsters. This sent the unnatural things scurrying in all directions. Thomas hurried into an alleyway and took up a new firing position behind a dumpster.

He then heard a sound that he had not expected to hear this night. Sirens screamed as they approached the strip mall. He smiled gratefully; perhaps some elements of law enforcement had survived the apocalypse. Surely they would be willing and eager to join in his crusade to rid the world of this darkness. He ran from the alley as he heard the police cars pull up in the mall's parking lot. The cops leapt from their patrol cars and pointed their weapons at the monster slayer. Thomas could not even begin to fathom why they wanted to kill him. Then it struck him like a bolt of lightning, they were possessed by demons. The devil had sent them here to stop him from doing the Lord's work. Thomas raised his pistol towards his enemies but before he could get off a shot the servants of Hell unleashed a hail of lead.

As he lay on the blacktop choking on his blood, one of the demon possessed policeman who had just arrived on the scene walked over to the dying man and looked contemptuously down upon his prone form. The last thing Thomas heard before his life slipped away was the unclean spirit who came in the guise of a man speaking to its minions, "Good, you nailed the bastard. This psycho's been shooting trick or treaters all night."

THE CAGE

Marija Elektra Rodriguez

“She’s clinically insane—lost it a few years ago. Her first victim was her closest friend and then she progressed to killing random sexual partners.”

The doctor pointed at a young girl as he spoke to his students. She was like a caged animal, sitting on the floor of her cell with her hair falling into her eyes. Her arms were covered in horrible burn scars, as though cigarettes had been stubbed out on her skin. She absently picked at one, digging her finger into her flesh and creating a pulpy wound.

“She liked to enucleate her victims—gouge out their eyes. You can see the motion she uses to pick her skin,” he said, pausing to mimic her scratching gesture against the fabric of his suit. “It’s very effective in removing the human eye.”

There was a sudden spasm of panic in her features. Her body violently contorted and slammed against the wall, as though she were being pulled by unseen hands. She scratched at the air, fighting an invisible presence.

The doctor quickly swiped his access card against the keypad on her door and rushed inside. He struggled to restrain her and then plunged a syringe into her vein.

“This will help you relax, you filthy *whore*,” he whispered in her ear, his voice low and guttural so his students wouldn’t hear. “I’m going to have some fun with you tonight. You’re always so restless on Halloween.”

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She soaked in the burning water, dipping her head backward and fanning out her long black hair. It felt like silk when she washed it this way, merging with the water to become a dark halo. She closed her eyes and sank below the surface. Water like fire. It burned her eyelids, her lips and the soft flesh of her neck. She found the pain soothing. It filled the emptiness.

Her thoughts were broken by the sound of her dog barking. It brought her back to the surface with a deep gasp of air.

*How long was I under?* she wondered.

A few seconds later she heard the click of a key in the front door. Marie glanced at the clock. It was six forty-five; Vero would be letting herself in. She stepped out of the antique bathtub and reached for the nearest towel, wrapping it around her torso. The water dripped down her body and splashed messily on the floor.

“Maro!” Vero chirped excitedly as she walked through the house.

“In here,” Marie called.

“You didn’t have to get dressed for me.” Vero purred like a satisfied cat and smiled cheekily. She rifled through her tote bag and produced a short black dress. “I’ve got the perfect Halloween costume for you. You can wear those black angel wings from last year. It’s a classic bad fairy outfit.”

“Or dark angel,” Marie mused as she flicked through her closet in search of the wings.

Vero fiddled with the seam of her short skirt. “So, do you like it?” she asked, sashaying her hips from side to side. Marie burst into laughter when she realized Vero’s costume was a modified version of their all-girls-Catholic-school uniform.

“Mrs. Spencer would have a fit if she saw you now!” she said, pointing to the school blouse that had been transformed into a boob-tube top. Gone were the puffy sleeves and shapeless bodice; replaced with a tight-fitting, striped-green corset which still had the original moss green tie down the front.

“How do I look?” Vero asked as she pouted her lips and ran a glitter-painted fingernail through her hair.

“Perfect. Like an absolute whore. That guy you always flirt with on the ferry will be all over you tonight.”

“That’s the plan.”

~~~

The Halloween party was exquisitely staged. The subterranean university bar had been transformed into a hellish paradise, its entrance covered in black lace cobwebs and life-sized gargoyle statues. The bouncer, dressed as a ghoul, stamped their hands and laughed wickedly. Vero ran a fingernail down his chest as she passed him, much to his evident pleasure.

Marie’s skin shivered as she entered the club and she felt uneasy, as though someone was watching. She glanced over her shoulder and saw a

man in a dark suit staring at her, his tongue tracing his lower teeth. His expression sickened her and she turned to face him, but her vision was quickly obstructed by the growing crowd.

“I want to dance!” Vero screamed in Marie’s ear, eagerly pulling her to the center of the club. They were surrounded by witches and horned devils. Angels and courtesans danced together as demons looked on from the second-story balconies. The air pulsed with music and colored lights, making the night seem surreal.

Marie and Vero squeezed their way through the crowd. Marie felt the tickle of her bare skin against the bodies of random strangers, their hands lingering on her waist and thighs as she brushed past them.

There was a spiral staircase in the center of the main dance area, surrounded by an atrium of caged balconies. Alabaster limbs hung from between the bars, appearing lifeless in one flash of light, alive and dancing in the next.

“Let’s head up top. I want everyone to see us!” Vero said, pulling Marie up the stairs toward the pinnacle of the atrium. Marie compliantly let herself be dragged up the wrought-iron fixture, but she felt uneasy. She couldn’t shake the feeling of dread in her stomach.

With a spasm of fear, she realized there was an odd snarling sound rising above the music, as though a wild animal were nearby. Marie pulled free of Vero’s grasp, her skin shivering with adrenaline.

She stared into the pulsating darkness of the cage where the noise had originated. A witch sat on a demon that ground his hips beneath her. They turned slowly and smiled at Marie in unison. There were maggots where their eyes should have been, and decayed lips sneered at her over long white teeth.

A shrill scream escaped Marie’s lips.

“What’s wrong?” Vero cried. Marie pointed to the cage, the air caught in her lungs. But when she turned back, the couple had vanished.

There was no one there.

Marie swore bitterly under her breath. *I’m losing my mind*, she thought.

“It’s just the lights,” Vero said, reaching out and pulling Marie up the remainder of the stairs.

She’s always pulling me up, Marie thought. *But I just keep sinking*.

From the top of the atrium they had a panoramic view of the club. The dance floor was a mosaic of flesh, painted with colored lights and

fantastical costumes. Vero had already started dancing and Marie found her body responding to the music despite her lingering sense of anxiety. Her hips slowly ground to the rhythm and her hands clutched the bars of the cage. She let her head roll back and her long hair tickled the small of her back.

It's Halloween, she thought. In this costume, surrounded by a curtain of darkness, I can lose myself.

She began to dissolve and then she was gone, swimming in a sea of anonymity and rhythm. The songs bled into each other, a seamless tattoo of international beats. The movements of the crowd were hypnotic—gruesome bodies swaying in a frenzied state of unison. She felt dizzy, as though she were outside her body. The blood pounded through her veins and her breath became labored. She wanted sex more than anything else at that moment.

“You’re giving out a strong erotic energy.”

She heard his voice before she saw him, as though he were inside her mind. He sounded deep and guttural—the kind of voice she would associate with a cruel individual.

“It’s like a pheromone. I can see it, smell it...” He grabbed her by the shoulders and spun her around, forcing her to watch as he ran his tongue across his teeth. “Taste it,” he said.

She was alone with him in the cage. *What happened to Vero?*

A soft, subtle laugh escaped his lips. He towered above her, his jet black eyes burning into her.

“Who are you?” she spat.

He slowly pressed his body against hers, forcing her to back up against the cage. He stood so close she could have gagged on his scent. The soft fabric of his suit tickled her bare thigh and she felt an intense wave of disgust deep in her abdomen.

“You leave the scent of *whore* everywhere you go.” He hissed the words through thin lips. In the inconstant light, the bars of the cage cast long shadows over his features.

“Get off me! What do you want?” she screamed against the music.

“You know exactly what I want, *whore*. Show me what those bastards pay for.” His fingers tightened around her neck and forced her higher against the bars, suffocating her. He was panting in her face, his breath rancid and intoxicated. She struggled to breathe against his weight, her

breasts crushed against his chest. He locked his jet black eyes with hers and in that instant she understood what he meant to do.

“Don’t fight me,” he snarled, his voice almost bestial. He ran his fat tongue across her cheek, sending shivers of disgust down her spine.

She writhed against him as he dug his thumbs into her throat. She was trapped in those jet black eyes, like dark prisms and she was falling, sinking into unconsciousness. He released her, but it was too late. She was already broken, limp in his arms.

“Where’s Vero?” she whispered helplessly.

“Vero died a long time ago,” he replied, a brutal smile on his lips.
“Don’t you remember? You killed her.”

He plunged a syringe into her vein. “This will help you relax, you filthy *whore*,” he whispered in her ear.

“I’m going to have some fun with you tonight. You’re always so restless on Halloween.”

HALLOWEEN TREATS

Matthew Wilson

The boy went to the house through pity. The banshee on the porch had long given up and retreated back inside. No one would visit her house this Halloween. Not since her boy drowned in the bath and she lost her mind. The court believed she'd run to get the ringing phone while her son was making a bubble beard.

This made her incompetent, not evil.

He didn't want to see the woman who didn't go loopy when her child was taken in such a manner. A wrong number had taken less than a minute. By the time she got back he was face down, floating.

Stephen fixed his vampire's collar and braved the steps, two at a time.
Do it quickly before you bottle it.

He knocked, felt passing undead children stare, point. Some picked up rocks for ammo and ran instead when motion sensor light came on. Mother said the woman was mad, not bad. She needed help. But of course she hadn't come within a mile of this place either.

He wasn't doing this for a bet. He did it because he felt it was right. She'd looked so miserable, close to weeping and, after her history, supposed she deserved a little sunshine. A little human company might draw her out of her shell; instead of ordering a food van to drop deliveries once a week she might build the courage to walk super market aisles without being spat on.

Movement inside.

Stephen straightened like he'd been summoned to the headmaster's office. He squinted, thought he saw her raise a chair through the frosted glass threateningly. "Stay away from my car!" she warned. "I know your mom so if one egg hits my windows you won't see a splash of sun for being grounded."

What a grouch.

Stephen supposed she'd good reason to be cautious. "I – I'd like some candy, please."

Was it supposed to sound like a question?

She had jittery nervous animations like a small hamster coming out of its straw filled mini Wendy house, expecting attack from all and any side.

Nose twitching, she poked her head from out the door, twice as tall as him, she didn't look down but rather peered into the dark over his head like a cowboy anticipating an Indian ambush. As soon as she stepped out onto the porch she expected kids with spray cans to paint a moustache on her face.

There came no raid and her defences lowered but not completely. She stared down at him like he'd walked over her roses. Time passed.

Stephen repeated his want, he could see her nostrils swell and constrict like a whirlpool's neck. He'd never seen eyes so black.

"Well, don't you look scary! Are you a vampire?"

Stephen managed to regain enough control of his body to move his head up and down. Once.

"They're usually the most bloodthirsty," she smiled. "Come in, sweetie. The tray is inside."

Stephen blinked. Wait a minute.

She watched him expectantly, with no sign of distress. How did you tell if someone was nuts? He was here now; her only visitor beside a scared paper boy throwing inked news on her lawn from a safe distance for a year at least now. Mom had taught him people were good inside. Disregard gossip.

He still thought this was a bad idea. Knew kids from class still watched him from shadows. Tomorrow they'd either call him hero or coward. He chose the former and made sure to wipe his feet on the welcome mat.

The front porch had taken the brunt of her Halloween labour, strewn with fake dead bugs and draping spider silk webbing like curtains. The hallway was reminiscent of any house, there was no Cerberus ready to leap out and tear his throat. Just a coat hat and umbrella stand he did not insert his fake cardboard leg into in case he insulted her.

He didn't intend staying longer than a minute. Just enough to make her feel part of the human race and to get his candy. Being a Samaritan was one thing. But he was a hungry one at that.

The kitchen light was on, hurting his painted eyes as he nearly slipped up on the polished white tiles. He looked down to make sure his boots tracked no mud in after he'd made a short cut across the lawn. After the stories, he'd half believed she had lain a trip wire across her path to catch out unwary travellers.

As promised, on the sideboard smelling of nose curling cleaning products was a bowl of brightly coloured candy wrappers. He didn't like to

entertain the idea there were tiny razors in them. Wished he could turn the evil natter other kids implanted in his mind off easy as a switch.

“Here you go, take as many as you like. I doubt anyone else will bother coming for them.”

Stephen did with a ‘thank you.’ “You’re not like what everyone says.”

The woman’s eyes lost the last of their light the ceiling lamps threw down. “What do they say?” she asked, the rubber spiders falling from her hair. Stephen thought her smile was too long, she must have been out of practice a while and imitated what she felt was the right response.

Stephen twiddled his fingers. “That you’re crazy.”

“Now you don’t believe that?”

“No. You’re nice. I’m going to tell everyone at school.”

“So more children like you might come here? It would be nice to talk to someone, it’s awful being lonely. Would you like a soda from the fridge?”

“Thank you, no. I’d better head back.”

“It’s no trouble.”

“Really. My mom will be worried.”

“But you will come back?”

Candy in the palm of his hand and promises of soda in the fridge.

“Yes,” he smiled. “I’ll be back, just try and stop me.”

She gave him more candy to be getting on with and closed the door behind him.

Such a nice boy.

Mention of soda left her tongue fuzzy, she could murder one.

The werewolf fell out the fridge as she opened the door. The boy’s hands were tied behind his back, tears had frozen his eyes shut; he was covered head to toe in ice like a second brittle shade of skin. “Let me go. Please! I want my mom.”

The woman laughed and shoved him back hard so he hit his head on the salad shelf and passed out. As promised she helped herself to a drink and took a slurp.

“Be quiet,” she said.

Ice cubes didn’t talk. The doctor said she might hear voices again. Ice cubes didn’t wear clothes or pee themselves either. This thing had it all wrong.

She snapped the tab off her drink and, sitting down, absently chewed on a Curly Wurly.

The vampire had promised to bring more friends. He was a good boy. He wouldn't lie.

More friends for her dead son to play with.
How delightful.

CANDYMAN

Neil Leckman

Every Halloween Scott Turly gave candy to the children who came trick-or-treating at his house. He was always very generous with his candy but what everyone talked about for weeks afterward was how fantastic it was. There was no store-bought fare that could match what he handed out. Speculation was that he made it at home, but nobody could ever prove it since he was never seen out of his house. Maybe he made midnight runs to some far off store that nobody knew about.

However he did it, every year he had fresh candy and it was so good kids had been known to fight over a couple of pieces. Jesse, Frank and I were going to sneak over to Mr. Turly's house and see if we could figure out where he got the candy, or maybe find a package with a name on it. We made our plan to perch in the old oak tree that looked down on the windows on the south side of his house and hoped we'd be able to see something come night.

As the kids lined up to get candy from Mr. Turly, we watched expectantly through a gap in the curtains at the windows to his living room and kitchen. There was nothing that helped to reveal anything new to us except the fact that he had a lot of candy ready to hand out. Finally the lines got shorter and the night darker and it looked like he might be running short of candy. The three of us began to get excited about the prospect of learning his secret.

Lindsey Colhan was walking alone up to the porch, a big smile on her face. She rang the doorbell and waited for Mr. Turly to open the door.

He looked down at Lindsey and then quickly looked up and down the street, which was empty.

"Come on inside and I'll get you some of my candy, Lindsey. I thought everyone was done for the night so I need to get something for you." He put an arm around her shoulder and hustled her inside. Once again he looked either way down the street, then, smiling, he followed her inside and shut the door.

He walked her over to his couch and had her sit there while he went to the kitchen. I took the binoculars hanging around my neck and watched him open a closet. He was doing something but I couldn't tell what because his

back was to me, then he stepped away to grab a small bowl. Inside the closet some strange slug-like creature hung from the bar that you put clothes on. It was oozing a brown liquid from open sores along its body. He walked back over, squeezed one of the open sores and something pink slid down its body onto the plate. He picked it up, wiped off the goo and wrapped it in paper like candy.

“Holy shit!!” Frank said. He almost lost his grip on the branch he was hanging from, Jesse grabbed him.

In the kitchen Mr. Turly stopped and looked towards the window, then set the plate down and walked over and peered out into the night. We had all shifted out of sight but only just. I didn’t like to think what he would have done if he’d caught us.

He walked back over and picked up the plate. He took it into the other room where he held it out for Lindsey. She took the candy, unwrapped it and placed it in her mouth. That familiar dreamy look came to her face and I almost vomited. A couple of moments later a puzzled look crossed her face and she curled up in agony. Pustules formed all over her face and neck and began to ooze a clear liquid. She began to twitch as the rapid forming spots began to come to a head.

Frank looked like he was getting sick as he turned away. Jesse, like me, was too enthralled to look away as the pustules began to pop and familiar shapes plopped out of them. Lindsey began to look smaller as they formed in greater numbers, covering every inch of her visible body. Soon all that was left was a lumpy pile of skin and hundreds of candies. Mr. Turly walked over, rolled up Lindsey’s skin and went into the kitchen. He opened the closet again, fed it to the slug and closed the door. A little later he turned off the lights and went up to his bedroom. When the light came on we crawled down from the tree, shaking.

“What do we do?” Jesse asked.

“Call the cops?” Frank suggested.

“No, we keep our mouths shut. Nobody will believe us, there’s no evidence except all that candy. If we say anything we might be next year’s treat!!” I said, firm in the knowledge that saying anything would be a very bad idea.

I chugged down the last of my beer, set the bottle down and got up to leave. “That’s why I don’t do the whole Halloween thing anymore, but you

can do whatever you want. Remember, though, that sometimes the treat you get was last year's trick on someone else.”

MIDNIGHT MATTERS

Matthew Wilson

Beware the night of Halloween
Night of monsters few have seen
That hide under kids' costumes
Walks the nights and then consumes

The treats that children find
Or are given from adults kind.
Then the monsters watching from the tree
Shall take from you and I and she.

Sometimes their bodies are found
In the tree tops or under ground
Partially eaten and not complete
But still the monsters watch, hungry, un-replete.

Take care of tricks and treat
As you walk the dark and hear the feet
Of monsters coming up from behind
Some adults are cruel as well as kind.

I'LL BE BACK

Ken L. Jones

Phil Thomas had been heavily involved in the world of comic books as a professional artist whenever he wasn't being a script doctor for horror movies. In the last twenty-five years of doing this he had met many interesting characters but the most fascinating person he had ever known was Armando L. Alpaca. During his long association with him he had often assisted the older artist with his comic book artwork. In the process of doing this he had become like a father to Phil. One of the main things that bound them together was their mutual belief in the occult. Armando was best known for his artwork on the so called "mystery books" that Marvel and DC Comics put out back in the seventies and eighties. What made Armando different from other such artists was that he truly believed in the existence of most of the strange things that he drew. When it came to this subject nothing was too far out for him to contemplate the possibility of and Phil had eagerly agreed with his views. One thing that both of them had spent a lot of time discussing was the subject of ghosts and exactly what the nature of life after death might be.

As a man who was getting on in years, Armando's interest in the afterlife didn't strike Phil as odd. He was also fascinated by the fact that Phil was in pretty bad health at the time and might actually pass away before him. At some point in their early association Armando began to speak of the great magician Harry Houdini who was very interested in communicating with his wife and friends from beyond the grave. Armando was very aware that Houdini had failed to do this and thought that it would be interesting if whichever one of them passed on first came back to the other with positive proof of survival. Intrigued himself, Phil had agreed and had sworn an oath to do that with him. Since they were both great fans of Arnold Schwarzenegger they chose the code words "I'll be back" to signify to the survivor that it was really one of them talking to the other from the great beyond. A few years after this Phil was forced to retire for a time due to his health problems. Concurrently old age caught up with Armando and his physical condition broke down until he finally passed on in the year 2000.

Soon after Armando's death Phil was alone in the new mobile home he and his family had purchased in Southern California which he soon found was too full of mischievous kids for his own taste. He was alone in the living room that Halloween, channel surfing, when one of the youngsters in the park began knocking at his back door. He threw the remote down on the kitchen counter and went across the large trailer only to find the prankster gone by the time he got there. What Phil saw upon returning to the living room caused his jaw to drop. Since he had accidentally left his TV on a channel that wasn't on their cable system there was only static on it. What caught his attention was that there was now a figure coming forward in it. As Phil finally stepped into the forefront of the screen he was amazed to see that it was Armando. What was most interesting about all this to him was that Armando was thirty years younger than when he had died. Armando grinned at Phil as he puffed on one of his cigarettes. He seemed to be studying the static around him and everything about the way he moved and gestured was exactly as Phil had remembered it. Exhaling a cloud of smoke, Armando began saying something but Phil couldn't understand him. His speech seemed to be swallowed up and distorted as if he was talking inside a hurricane. After a few minutes of this, Phil's wife arrived home from work and was honking outside for him to help her with her groceries. When they came back inside Armando was no longer on the screen but there was a heavy odor of cigarette smoke that wasn't there before. This was strange since nobody in Phil's family currently smoked.

A couple of years later the Thomas's purchased a home in the Inland Empire section of Southern California and, as was their tradition, had heavily decorated their living room for Halloween.

On the Saturday morning prior to October 31st, while the rest of his family went out shopping, Phil was left alone at home in the early morning hours. Given whom Armando was and what he had been interested in, Phil didn't find it strange to be thinking about him. In his honor he had popped in the Universal monster movie The Phantom of the Opera with Claude Rains which had been a favorite of the old man's. Watching it, Phil had been caught up in memories of his late friend.

About the middle of the movie his phone rang and he picked it up. He expected it to be his wife asking him if they needed ketchup or something mundane like that. Instead Phil was greeted by something far stranger. Someone claiming to be Armando was on the other end and Phil was

inclined to believe that it was him for several reasons. First of all Armando used to have a very heavy accent. He had been self-taught in English and some of what he said often contained words from his native Filipino language. Then there was the background noise too. Phil had been a veteran of many all night phone conversations with Armando. He would keep him company talking to his friend while the older man created art as he linked with him on a telephone operator's headset. The headset had sounded different than a regular phone. It tended to pick up a wide range of background noise very clearly. Whoever it was that was talking to Phil was wearing such an apparatus. What he had heard in the background convinced him even more. Everything sounded authentic and just as he had remembered it. The sound of several television sets playing on different channels was there. The CD of zither music from Switzerland was also playing as it always had been. Armando's many house cats that used to have the run of his apartment could be heard too. But most of all there was the deep inhaling sound of Alpaca smoking as well as the distinctive metallic click of his lighter being opened and shut. If this was some kind of a fake, then someone had went to a lot of trouble to approximate it.

Even stranger was the conversation itself. Armando told Phil how much he missed him. He asked Phil if he would like to join him right now and Phil didn't quite know how to reply. Armando chatted on about mundane things for awhile until Phil's call waiting signal cut in. Realizing that it must be his wife and son coming home Phil had told him just that, not knowing what else to say. Phil further told him that he had to help them with their groceries and asked Armando if he could call him back some other time. This seemed to really rile him. He angrily told Phil that it had been very hard to phone him and that he had been trying to do it for long time. Then once more he asked Phil to come to where he was.

Then as Phil said goodbye he replied softly, "I'll be back... very soon," and the phone went dead.

Seconds later Phil's family came home and they could see that he was quite upset. Phil suspected that this might have been a hoax played on him by a fellow cartoonist who knew both of them well enough to pull it off. After much investigation Phil couldn't find anything that supported that theory. This incident continued to be a source of irritation to Phil that did not lessen. Always in very frail health, he was now convinced that he was

going to die. This, coupled with a cataclysmic series of world events, proved more than his delicate constitution could stand.

The world wide economic events of 2009 played heavily on him and his family. The rock solid investments that they had made dissolved before their startled eyes and they were suddenly in immediate danger of losing everything that they had frugally tried to set aside for their old age and retirement. All of this manifested physically on Phil in ways that terrified him even further. He would have hours go by where his heart would race uncontrollably. It became difficult for him to sleep or even for him to rise up out of his easy chair in the living room. Trying to ignore all this, despite his family's protests, he had become extremely feverish and unable to eat as any food he tried to ingest tasted rancid in his mouth and nauseated him. The most sickening aspect of all these things that plagued him was that giant oozing sores opening up on his legs and feet. Finally one afternoon with the help of his adult son, Kevin, who still lived with him he attempted to take a shower and slipped and fell. After several hours of him protesting to the contrary, an ambulance was summoned and Phil was taken to what passed for a major hospital in the next town over from him.

Once installed there he had his worst fears confirmed. His heart was shot. He most likely was a diabetic although the doctors kept changing their minds about this point. Strangely enough the disease that he had thought was cancer and which had turned his legs and feet into open fields of wounds turned out to be nothing more than cellulitus. This disease was caused by normal stupid things like too much tobacco, alcohol and way too much salt in his diet. Most of this at this point mattered little to Phil because he was flat on his back in bed and couldn't move. He couldn't keep much food or liquid down and he burned with raging fevers and hallucinated like a madman. Through it all his wife spent as much time as she could with him trying to comfort him and give him hope but it did little to cheer him up.

Much of the time when he was alone in his private room he could feel the presence of his old friend Armando. He could smell the particular odor of his imported cigarettes as well as the tangy aroma of the lime based aftershave that his wife had sent him every Christmas from the Philippines. Phil vacillated between just wanting to give-up any fight to stay alive and bouts of trying to rally himself to hang on. He was especially aided in the latter by news that his oldest married son was going to be the father soon of the first male child in that generation of Thomas's. Despite his most valiant

efforts Phil was just not quite able to gain enough momentum to fight off the inevitable one more time. As Halloween day approached he tried to soothe himself by watching a marathon of scary movies that were on the TV in his room.

Once when one of the beautiful young nurses brought him a lunch that they both knew that he wasn't going to eat, she commented that she liked the movie he was watching saying softly, "That's one of my favorites."

Phil replied, "Thanks I helped write that one, at least all the good stuff in it."

The early part of the morning was a merry-go-round of well wishers. Tim Lawson, the artist who co-owned a small comic book publishing company with Phil and his son phoned in his greetings and threatened to bring along Phil's old pal the diminutive Australian story board artist Peter Pennington for a visit. Tim said that Peter thought that Phil was in some kind of a nut house like Arkham Asylum in the Batman comics and wanted to check it out for himself.

Phil groaned to Tim, "Look, man, I've got enough problems already. They are really strict here and they might call the cops on you two if you show up and start acting up and giving all the young nurses a lot of grief."

A minute later the phone rang again. It was James Todd Browning, Phil's unofficially adopted son who also helped out with the comic book company when he wasn't busy putting together horror movies to direct up in Hollywood. Todd was a little more somber than Tim had been as he wished Phil a happy Halloween.

"I can hear you're on the same TV channel I'm on," Todd said. "I saw that movie you were involved with earlier. That was really awesome, man. You've got to get well so we can make a flick out of our Uncle Tickle comic book."

"I sure would like to," Phil said morosely. "But just in case I don't, I want you to know that I've had a really good run. I'm not exactly a kid anymore so this isn't unexpected. Besides, you and Kevin can still put flesh on that skeleton and should be able to get a good movie out if it."

Todd then changed the subject. "I'm just not going to listen to this out of you, Phil. Don't do this to me, man, you've got too much to live for and you've got to see your grandson. That's all you've talked about for a long time to me."

Phil saw that resistance was futile so he just told his kind and thoughtful friend what he wanted to hear and then Todd said goodbye. Phil winced as he realized how much all of this reminded him of the end of the original Moulin Rouge movie. He felt like Toulouse Lautrec with all of the cancan dancers and other denizens of Paris coming to him to say one final farewell on his death bed. As he did this Phil realized for the thousandth time how much his life was like a movie.

Growing suddenly tired, he drifted into a troubled sleep as Bobby "Boris" Picket's The Monster Mash played on the TV as it faded into a station break. Then, as the old and sick often do, Phil's mind began drifting all over the place and he reran all the time he had spent hanging out with his friend Armando. Then suddenly with no transition he seemed to wake up in his room. To Phil's surprise he saw Armando standing at his bedside with a rather large pink cardboard box of the kind that might have a birthday cake in it. Phil treated all of this rather matter-of-factly and began chatting away with his old friend and mentor.

"I'm on kind of a tight deadline today, Phil. I really need you to give up all this useless struggling and come with me. You're long overdue on the other side so there's no use in fighting it anymore."

"What's it like over there?" Phil asked curiously.

"Whatever you have imagined about it is wrong but I know what your tastes are like and I think you will enjoy it."

"You're probably right about this, old friend, but I'm just not sure that I understand exactly how to die. Maybe I'm stupid or something..."

"I figured that this might be a problem so I asked Them if they could make this easy for you. All you have to do is open this box and it will be accomplished."

Just then Phil felt somebody shaking his shoulder gently but insistently. It was his lifelong friend and fellow cartoonist Patrick Yen and his lady Lois who was a head librarian in this town. Phil was glad to see Patrick as they hadn't seen each other in awhile. Patrick asked him what he had been dreaming about and told him that he had been carrying on quite a conversation with someone when they came in the room. Phil confessed to exactly what had happened.

Patrick replied, "This isn't about that phone call from beyond the grave, is it? I believe in the occult as much as you do and I was a close

friend to Armando too but I can't help but think that you might be carrying all this just a little bit too far."

"I don't know Patrick I think the jig is up. I told you a long time ago that I felt that all my life I had been out racing the 13 and there is just not any escaping it this time. I guess I'm just going to have to open that box that Armando has and see what happens next."

Patrick broke down and started crying at hearing this. "This isn't fair of you, man. We've been friends since college and you're one of the only people around that I can talk to about all the Beat authors and poetry and great paintings and things like that. Don't do this to me. Tell Armando that you're going to stick around."

Saying this, Patrick totally broke down. He found that he couldn't speak anymore and so he came up and patted Phil on the arm and then with Lois's help left the room, sobbing.

Phil's wife showed up a few minutes later and said, "What did you do to upset poor Patrick like that? I just saw him out in the lobby."

"I don't know, I guess he just couldn't take seeing me like this."

Quickly wanting to move beyond this awkwardness, his wife gave him with a box of licorice candy and a copy of the Comics Buyer's Guide and Entertainment Weekly magazine. Then they sat there and chatted amiably and watched the original Night of the Living Dead by George Romero on TV for a time. His wife mentioned that she had to get home a little bit early today to help protect the house against the wave of vandalism that Halloween always set off in their adopted town.

Phil broke down and cried, "You know I've never been away from home on a holiday before."

Not knowing exactly what to say, his wife bent over and kissed him and then left the room. Using one hand Phil pried open the box of candy and ate a couple of pieces of it. Just then afternoon nurse, Autumn, who he was quite taken with because she reminded him of the only serious relationship that he had had prior to meeting his wife, came into his room. She was a very friendly comforting presence and gladly accepted some of his candy when he offered it to her.

"I have to make my rounds now but I'll return to check on you and if anything comes up you have your emergency button by you. Oh yes, one of your guests, that elderly Asian gentleman, left something for you at the front desk. I'll go get it for you."

Autumn walked back into the room holding a pink box the kind that birthday cakes come in and sat it down on the large brown bedside tray next to Phil. Later when he was alone Phil reached over with a trembling hand and started to undo the piece of tape that kept the box closed. As he did so he was surprised to hear his room flood with the theme song from the old true occult TV show One Step Beyond. He had loved that series as a kid and its spooky music had always raised goose bumps on him as he had watched its reruns in his dark bedroom as a youth. For a split second Phil wondered if it might be coming from the box itself. Then he heard a familiar voice. He realized that what he was hearing was Ed Rothaar on the local PBS TV show I Remember Television and to his relief understood that it was coming from the room across the hallway from him. Phil let out a sigh of relief at this recognition and was about to attempt to open the box again when Abernathy a big jovial Black man from the West Indies came into his room. Phil liked Abernathy who greatly resembled Thomas's favorite singer Aaron Neville and this impression was reinforced by the fact that the huge man was always singing softly as he made his rounds as an orderly.

"What's in the box, Mr. Thomas?" he inquired with a smile.

Thinking quickly, Phil replied, "Something I'm not supposed to have, you know, sweets. I'm supposed to be diabetic or something, aren't I?"

"Now who would bring something like that to you?"

"I don't know Autumn said it was some Asian gentleman but it doesn't matter, let's get it out of here before I'm tempted to eat something I shouldn't. Just to be on the safe side you ought to make sure no one else eats it by tossing it in the dumpster because I'm not exactly sure who brought it here. It could be poisoned or something, you know?"

Abernathy picked up the box as requested and departed the room, singing 'Don't Worry Be Happy' in a tuneful high voice. As he began the descent to the alley way of the hospital he became curious about the contents of the box itself and was tempted to open it to see if it contained donuts, his favorite. If so, he might purloin a couple for his upcoming break. But then he thought the better of it because he had really been packing on the pounds lately and was trying to avoid such temptations. Abernathy threw it on top of the packed dumpster in the alley with a sigh and then went back into the depths of the building to complete his rounds.

Seconds later an elderly hobo named Homeless Harold entered the alley way as furtive as a sewer rat. He wore layers of mismatched clothing that were streaked in dirt. Times had been hard for the former used furnishing business owner. Long a tax cheat and founding member of the local Tea Party movement, he had crossed the line when he had so-called yard sales at his home. They were nothing more than tax dodges where he illegally sold furniture and didn't pay sales tax on any of it to the state. Since his customers habitually parked all over the front yard of his next door neighbor, who hated him anyway, it should have come as no surprise to the old man when that neighbor had turned him in to the State Board of Equalization and the IRS.

Currently Harold's sole occupation was trying to figure out how to get edible strands of cheese out of discarded pizza boxes. The old man's stomach rumbled audibly as he sauntered up to the dumpster and noticed the pink box that Abernathy had just thrown away. A long strand of drool ran down his chin as he recognized it as the kind of container that usually held sweets. Since he loved such treats above all else and hadn't had anything like that for several days he retrieved the box with one fast movement. He retreated deeper into the recesses of the alley, turned a plastic milk crate on its side and sat down to enjoy his feast. Before he did so he realized what day it was and wished himself a happy Halloween with a big tooth-full grin. He opened the box and couldn't believe his eyes as a blinding flash of white light escaped from it. It reminded him of when he was a teenager and had been on vacation in Las Vegas back when the army had set off one of its many nuclear tests in the desert nearby. Homeless Harold let out a bloodcurdling scream that seemed to be swallowed up by the tidal wave of light itself.

Meanwhile, ten stories up in Phil Thomas's private room, he suddenly became aware of a strange chain of events which he could barely see out the window. Whatever had just happened released a sudden wave of peace and contentment that flooded every atom of his being. Suddenly feeling much better, he picked up the phone and asked the operator to dial a certain number for him.

"Hello Todd, it's me, Phil. I just wanted to let you know how much better I'm feeling and that I'm going to work real hard and do everything they tell me so that I'll be around to see that grandson of mine," he said, as tears of joy ran down his cheeks. "Oh yeah and I think I've got a great idea

for a scary movie. Are you ready for this one? There was this comic book artist and he and this other older comic book artist he was friends with were wondering what happened when you died...”

GRAVEYARD HAG

Misha Murphy

Liz stood at the door ready for the Halloween party; she just had to do one small thing before she got there. Every year on this night she took lilies to her grandmother's grave. It had once been a family tradition, until her father decided to leave them the previous Halloween. That year her mother went by herself, wanting to be alone. This year her mother had decided she didn't want to go but she did buy the flowers for Liz to take.

Liz grabbed the flowers and headed out the door. Her mother yelled something out to her but Liz ignored her. The graveyard was only a short walk away, near where the party was being held, so she didn't bother to drive. It was a beautiful night and she planned on enjoying it. When she arrived at the graveyard she stopped at the entrance, just looking around. All her friends thought graveyards were scary, but Liz loved them. Ghosts and scary stories were something she had grown up with, something her father had shared with her. As she walked towards her grandmother's grave she thought she heard leaves crunching. She looked around but saw no one. She shook her head, assuming she was hearing things. Thankfully the grave was near the entrance and the lampposts were close enough to give off a little light so she could see.

"Hey Grams, sorry I haven't been out much. It's been hard since Dad went. Mom's changed so much, you wouldn't recognize her now. I miss you. I miss her." As she spoke she was cleaning off her grandmother's grave. It was covered in dead flowers and trash. Again she heard crunching leaves.

"Is someone there?" she asked, still not seeing anyone.

"You shouldn't come here. Not on All Hallows Eve," an old woman said. She had come behind Liz, who jumped and grabbed her chest. "It's dangerous here at night on this day."

Now she was getting closer and Liz could see her slightly better. The lights from the lamp posts around the graveyard were not much to go by. The old woman seemed to be wearing raggedy old clothes and using a walking stick.

"What do you mean?" asked Liz before she could stop herself. This old woman had to be a homeless person and she knew better to feed into their

delusions.

"Tonight's the one night the Graveyard Hag can take souls. Enter into her realm and your hers, if she so chooses." Now Liz was getting worried, the old woman really was delusional and getting closer.

"Oh, well I best go then, before she gets me." Liz turned but the old woman was now in front of her. She jumped back and looked behind her, wondering how she had moved that fast.

"No getting away from the Graveyard Hag, Missy. Once she has you in her sights you're forever stuck until she lets you go," the old woman hissed at her around yellowed rotten teeth. This close Liz could see all of the wrinkles and her white eyes. She was blind.

"Look, old lady. I've no idea what you're talking about, so get out of my way!" She was not being nice now. Liz was scared half to death and just wanted to get to the party and forget this ever happened.

"Don't try to deceive an old woman," she moaned. "I know who you are. Your mother made a deal. Your soul to kill her husband. Now it's time to collect." Liz could only gape in amazement. Her mother got rid of her father and her? Why?

"My mother would never do that!" she exclaimed. She went to run but found she couldn't move.

"She got you an extra year, my dear, but she did give you up. Don't try fighting, as I said, you can't get away from me."

"You can't take my soul! It's mine. My mother would never give me up. I'm her child!" Liz was trying hard to move but her feet were stuck to the ground. The old woman was clucking her tongue at Liz, shaking her head in sorrow.

"Our deal was a soul of her blood in exchange for her husband's death. She sent you here to our meeting place, otherwise why come to a graveyard tonight? No, she sent you here and you're mine. Now child, this may sting a bit..."

"No! I'm not ready to die! I'll do anything. Just let me go!" Liz was struggling, but getting nowhere. Black was edging her vision and she could see people crowding around her, shouting and trying to grab her.

"Anything, huh? I do have something I need done. You would be perfect. "The people were fading now. She could only see the old woman staring at her, head cocked.

"What do you want?" Liz croaked. She was tired and scared.

"No. You must agree before I tell you. If you want to live, you must agree." Liz was nodding, unable to stop herself. A small part was screaming at her to stop, she didn't know what she was agreeing to.

"Good. " Now she could move, but slowly. "A deal is a deal, Elizabeth Livingston. You are now the soul keeper of this graveyard."

The old woman was cackling now and the people were back, shouting at her. She covered her ears and started running towards the exit, but when she made it she bounced off a barrier and fell. As she stood she reached up, feeling an invisible wall.

"Oh, you can't leave. You're stuck here now." The old woman was changing in front of her eyes. She was growing younger and more beautiful, strangely looking like Liz. Then she looked exactly like Liz.

"How's this a deal? How am I alive if I'm stuck here?" demanded Liz. She started towards the woman but was having difficulty walking. She looked down and realized she had grown old. Panicking, she touched her face, she felt wrinkles and saw gnarled hands. "What is this?"

"You're alive, never to die. It's your job to be the Graveyard Hag. You're to keep souls here; if they escape you must collect them and help them pass into Heaven or Hell. You'll figure it out. Enjoy!"

The old lady skipped out of the graveyard, humming. Liz was banging on the barrier, crying, while the souls of the dead surrounded her, begging for forgiveness and freedom. As she fell to the ground all she felt was sorrow and hatred. How could her mother do this to her? She wanted to go back home, to watch TV and chat with her friends. This had to be a bad dream.

"It's okay, Munchkin. I'm here." Someone was leaning over her, pushing the souls back. His voice sounded familiar. She looked up and saw her father. He was hugging her now, letting her cry onto his shoulder. "Don't worry; we'll get you out of this my love."

She could only keep crying. The other souls were quiet, staring at them. She wiped away her tears and stood leaning on her father.

"Yes, we will. And we'll make Mom pay. She won't get away with this." With that the new Graveyard Hag started walking deeper into her new realm, waiting for the day she could take her revenge.

HALLOWEEN

Rick McQuiston

Matt huddled in the corner of the room as a dwindling fire sprayed shadows on the walls. The remains of his dinner sat in his stomach like a stone. His head ached. And worst of all, he was scared.

It had all been leading up to this night. The night when the border between worlds was thin. The night when the spirits of the dead walked the Earth.

Halloween.

It had started weeks earlier, although Matt couldn't recall exactly which date but he did remember the day well. It was the beginning of October. The leaves on the trees were busy changing from green to orange, yellow, and red and the unmistakable chill of autumn was in the crisp, cool air. He was walking along, minding his own business and enjoying the fresh breeze on his face, when he noticed it: the first sign of Halloween.

It was a carved pumpkin sitting on a rotted tree stump in someone's front yard. The jack-o'-lantern glared at Matt with its hollowed-out eyes, its vacant mouth; its triangular nose. He tried to ignore it; it was just one of many Halloween traditions people practiced. It was a decoration, nothing more.

But as he scurried past it Matt couldn't help but notice the way its eyes seemed to be following him. It was watching him, tracking his movements, waiting for something. And then a seeping greenish light lit the pumpkin from within. It bulged with infected life.

Matt stumbled away as fast as he could. The safe, normal world had been suddenly plunged into the realm of horror. Something impossible had become possible. Sanity had slipped into madness.

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It was a few days later, when Matt had convinced himself that he had imagined the pumpkin, that he saw it: the colors creeping along the row of bushes, coiling around the plants, strangling all they touched with their unnatural shades.

Matt stopped his car in the middle of the street. Suddenly getting to work on time wasn't important to him anymore.

It was a black so dark it swallowed all around it, leaving nothing behind as it slid along. Matt noticed a small chipmunk attempt to escape but was engulfed in the dark stuff when it got too close. It absorbed the poor rodent without so much as a sound. And the orange, a glowing ember of perverted color slithering along next to the black, occasionally mingling its swirling hues with its lethal brethren, it too enveloped all it touched.

Matt felt the cold realization that something was very wrong grip him tightly. It pulled him away from the normal world he had enjoyed all his life and pushed him into a frightening one full of dangers.

He sped away, never once looking back.

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The cat scurried across the road. Matt barely had enough time to slam on his brakes, narrowly missing the black feline. After reaching the side of the street, the cat turned its head almost completely around and glared at the car that had almost hit it. A thick cracking noise echoed as its vertebrae snapped. But it didn't notice. It merely snarled as its tongue shot out of its mouth like a snake tasting the air. With a tilt of its head it continued on its way. Its tail dragged on the ground, leaving a greasy trail of what appeared to be blood.

Matt remembered his superstitions well and a black cat crossing your path was definitely near the top of the list.

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Several days passed and the memories of what he had seen gnawed at Matt's mind. He tried to convince himself that none of it was real, but all it took was an image of the pumpkin sitting on its tree stump, or the black cat with its head facing one way and its body the other, to remind him that what he had seen was real. Halloween was fast approaching and this fact was not lost on him; he was starting to make the connection between the dark holiday and the frightening things he'd seen.

So when he first noticed it it almost didn't scare him  
Almost.

The decorations. The otherwise harmless paper spiders, cardboard witches, cotton cobwebs and plastic tombstones adorning the front lawns and porches of the homes lining the streets.

Matt stood on the sidewalk, his eyes glued to the writhing Halloween decorations. He watched the things squirm as if they were alive, each jostling back and forth as they tried to free themselves from their bonds.

A plastic skeleton managed to work itself free from the strings holding it to a tree and darted directly towards him, bared teeth gleaming, empty eye sockets glowing red.

Matt backed away from the nightmarish display only to bump into a row of bushes. He stumbled through them as he tried to get away. The skeleton was still lurching towards him, as were the other decorations: bristling spiders scampered along the ground; cloaked demons floated in the air; black bats swarmed on the trees.

Matt tried not to look back as he ran down the sidewalk but he couldn't help himself. He ran even faster when he saw the rotted hands clawing their way up from the ground in front of several crumbling tombstones that a short while earlier had been handmade decorations. Now they were real gravestones marking God-knows-what beneath them.

After he managed to make it home he locked himself up in his house tight as a drum, shutting himself off from the outside world. There he stayed as the days and nights crawled past him, reminding him of the inevitability that when the borders between worlds grew thin something would come for him... on Halloween.

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The fire began to die, allowing darkness to creep into the room. Matt thought about getting up and leaving his house, but he quickly dismissed the idea. Where would he go? Who would believe him? Besides, there might be other Halloween horrors waiting for him. It was the holiday itself that was after him, of that much he was sure. For some bizarre reason Halloween wanted to hurt him.

Matt tried to remember what other aspects of the holiday there were. He'd already seen jack-o'-lanterns, black cats, even the traditional colors which symbolized nighttime and fire, but he knew there was much more to Halloween.

The heavy knock on the door jarred Matt from his thoughts.

“Trick or treat.”

The words sliced through the front door as if it wasn’t there. Normally, the sound of children chanting the familiar phrase was an enjoyable part of the holiday but not this time. Whatever was begging for a treat on Matt’s front porch wasn’t a child. It didn’t even sound human. It was deeper, guttural, like an old man taking his last breath.

“Trick or treat.”

Matt knew what he had to do. The words were a threat - either give them a treat or they’ll play a trick on you. It wouldn’t be the kind of trick someone would want.

Matt searched the room frantically until he found something that would work.

Possibly.

He snatched the half-eaten candy bar from the floor and slowly approached the door. The doorknob squeaked as he turned it, which caused the *Trick or treat* chanting to stop. The voice on the other side of the door changed into groans punctuated with slobbering grunts and seething growls. Matt felt every single heartbeat in his chest as he twisted the doorknob and, with his hand over his mouth, he pulled the door open.

A cold rush of stale air that stank of decay and mold drifted into his face. Matt looked up and immediately wished he hadn’t.

The thing on his porch was a trembling collection of every possible nightmare he could ever dream up. It swayed its foul bulk back and forth slightly, convulsing as thick syrupy arms thrashed to the ground. As a whole it smelled like raw sewage, but with a sweet aroma of candy mixed in.

Matt raised the candy bar with a shaking hand and held it up for the creature to see.

A pumpkin and two skeletal arms were fused into the middle of the swirling orange and black colors and the twisted head of a black cat, slick with pale slime, gyrated on top of the beast. It focused its gaze on the candy and, in a blink of an eye, snatched the food from Matt’s outstretched hand.

“Thank you,” it groaned and slithered away into the cool October night.

Matt stood in his doorway, staring at his slime-coated front porch. The thing had made its point. It was the culmination of the holiday, apparently smeared together to confront non-believers, or in Matt’s case - someone

who simply didn't bother with it anymore. So occasionally it let itself be known.

As he closed his front door, Matt felt relief wash over him. The latch click into place as a strange thought slipped into his mind:

What about Christmas?

THE MAZE

Matthew Wilson

To whoever finds this note after the fire.

I hope you understand my madness. Halloween has always been my favourite holiday of the year. Yes, I've always been a big kid at heart and the fact that the portal between the dead world and this one is closest then has always been most exciting to me.

I had no friends to tell me this was wrong or creepy, so now I place my poisoned candy along my drive and watch early starters step over bodies, thinking them gnome-like decorations, along with skinned skeletons, beside my door. It took some doing, snapping the rings off their fingers to remove all traces of identity.

My lawn has real bear traps and my fake spider web is covered in fine dust, an irritant to the eyes and able to liquify lungs if breathed in. Having no friends has left me many hours to construct such a light show to draw them like moths. The puddles on the rockery are not just for show. The copper wiring in them has enough volts to cook many children wishing to dance in the acid rain my sprinkler pees down.

I can smell the reek of burnt flesh through my keyhole as I write this. In the street a hysterical mother recognises her child lain face down in my garden's ornamental fish pond, fighting off piranhas to save the fragments of his face for an open casket funeral.

No matter. I have many more fun and games to come.

Two hours and, though many try, none have reached the end of my drive. No one rings the doorbell though an Irish lad came close a while back, leaping over the trip wire sparkling with its previous victims blood which made it visible.

He couldn't miss the welcome mat covering the hole of spikes. The rats that made their home down there have already devoured his eyes. Halloween is so fun. Such a blast to while away the boredom. I let my dog off its lead, it's not been fed in seven days but seems to have made friends with the neighbour's kid already, carrying his face off like a chewed Frisbee.

I suppose it would have been nice to have friends, feel a part of the human race again. But the cancer is deep within my veins now and, like

much in life, it is too late. Let the children have their fun on my lawn; I do not mind the noise. On the brink of death I bet they have never savoured life more in their short days.

Ah, here is one at last.

A policeman knocking on my door. A cheat maybe, as his long legs have an advantage over a child. No gold medal shaped candy for him. I have a pistol beside this page; his knocking is getting vicious, hurting my head. Please excuse me a moment.

Thank you. That is better.

The silence does my temper wonders. Blue lights make me look up and the man on the bull horn tells me he only wants to talk, but he does not even have the courage to come down my garden of games and try his luck.

Damn.

The bang outside tells me my dog has left this world and shortly I shall join it. I have already pulled the nozzle off the main gas tap and welcoming sleep is pulling me down toward the paper. I just want you to understand that once I was a good man. I am going to lock this confession in my safe, a fire proof box secreted in the wall. I'm sure the resulting explosion will not destroy it when I light my final cigarette

Maybe I could have been saved.

But then I would have missed my games.

And, friend, I have had such a wonderful time.

A WARM OCTOBER NIGHT

Ron Koppelberger

It was October 31st and the streets were dimly lit with the lanterns and glow sticks of little boys and girls in Halloween dress. The air echoed with the faint sing-song lilt of Trick or Treat, Trick or Treat and the demon rejoiced, for it was that time, that special time where he could roam free and do as he wished. He was a dark silhouette against the side of the shed as the children passed by, unseen except for the littlest ones who cried at the darkness. He stared after them and relished the sound of their tears as he crept forward in shadow and darkness.

There were groans and wild maniacal laughter coming from the Freemont's house, they had violet lights and bright orange jack-o-lanterns lining their drive. A host of clothing stuffed bodies lay draped across their yard and roof. The children oooohhed and ahhhhaaaad, they might get potato chips there or maybe even candy bars, full sized ones. Alan Freemont loved to go all out for Halloween. He was dressed to the hilt like a zombie except for the name tag that read "HI I'M ALAN". On the front porch he had a black cardboard coffin filled with candy. Alan opened and shut the lid as each child came forward. "Cooooommeee seeee what I have for you, little onessssss!" he groaned as he lifted the lid and moaned. The crowd of children giggled and some yelled in surprise at the severed arm that Alan pulled from the coffin. "Here you goooooo, little ghouls and boysssssss!" he moaned again as the children held their pillowcases forward for the treat.

The demon watched from across the street, wondering what Alan might taste like. He thought about his appearance for a brief instant before he began edging toward Alan's house. Alan saw the stooped figure moving slowly across the street and a jolt of fear, real fear, coursed through him in chill waves of warning. The figure moved closer revealing its visage to Alan in shades of black light.

Alan stood there for a moment, shocked at what he was looking at. Great costume, only thing was, it didn't really look like a costume. Its head was misshapen and pumpkin shaped and its eyes, those damn eyes he thought; they were dark and glowing black if that's possible. Its hands were outstretched and wanting, three fingers with blood red claws and bits of loose flesh hanging from the wrists. It moved closer and opened its mouth

greedily. What came out sounded like, “WHHHHHAAAATTTT YOUUUU GOOTSSSSSS FERRRR MINEEEEEEE!” in garbled hissing spurts. Alan crossed himself and backed toward the front door of the house. “FERRRRRRRRR MMMMEEEEEEE!” it screamed as a great gout of blood sprayed from its jagged mouth. It was shoeless and its long scaled feet were visible, its toes were like water balloons, soft and flattening out with each step. “FEEEERRRRRRR MEEEEEE!” it screamed again.

In an odd sense of deja vu Alan saw the creature double and again as if it had been there before. The night was warm and dark and he remembered that, the creature, leaking blood and viscera and he sensed the events that would come. It would kill him and eat him for its Halloween treat. He had to stop it, he had to change fate. The demon stood before him, saliva dampening its fleshy lips. It grabbed Alan’s arm and bit down hard on his wrist. Alan screamed and jerked his hand away, blood spraying. “I’ve got to stop it!” he thought as he grabbed hold of the demon and bit down hard.

“AAAAAAARRRRRRRRGGGGGGHHHHH!” the demon screamed in anguish as Alan continued to bite it, even eating pieces of its flesh.

In the end the demon lost, Alan’s determination saw him through as he devoured the creature, every last morsel.

The next year Halloween arrived warm and whispering its secrets. The demon stood beside the shed in utter darkness, the only clue to his identity a nametag that said “HI I’M ALAN”!

ON THIS DARK AND SACRED NIGHT

James Pratt

In an old graveyard on the edge of town, a spirit slept in a borrowed grave. Perhaps spirit wasn't the right word. Some had called it a god once upon a time, holding festivals in its honor and singing praises to its name. Not a lord of the heavens or ruler of the mighty seas, but a god nonetheless. And though those days were long past and its presence had dwindled in the hearts and minds of the living, it lingered on. Like the dreams from which they sprung, gods could be discarded but never quite went away.

The spirit stirred at the first autumnal chill, for the harvest season was a time of power and heralded the approach of its holiest day. As the day drew closer, its dreams grew darker and more vivid. Over and over, it relived the coming of the Roman soldiers who had torn down the sacred stones and put its beloved children to torch and sword. Dogs whimpered and the wind howled in sympathy as the spirit muttered in its sleep.

On the first day of October, the spirit spent twelve hours opening the shriveled orbs that had once been eyes. Time weighed heavily upon it and each movement was a titanic effort. The spirit wouldn't be fully awake till the dawn of Samhain, the sacred day when the druids-priest gathered to give thanks to the Lord of the Harvest. In the meantime, it would stoke the glowing coals of indignation to a fiery rage by recalling the injustices of the past. Hate alone gave it the strength to resist the call of oblivion and even then only for one night a year.

Time crawled at a glacial pace but the day finally arrived. Decrepit and entombed, the borrowed body it had used the previous year was no good to the spirit now and a new vessel was required. Rising up out of the earth, it sniffed the wind in search of a place which reeked of fresh death. Finding it, the spirit went on its way. Animals scattered at its approach but people remained oblivious, save for a momentary chill as it passed, sight unseen, among the living. Unhampered by material impediments or fatigue, the spirit soon reached its destination. In a brightly lit room in the back of a somber-looking building, the gangly corpse of a wizened old man with features pitted and grooved as a walnut shell lay naked on a stainless steel table. It was not the fit young body for which the spirit had hoped, but the sacred hour was drawing near. It would have to do.

As it sank into the body, the spirit heard footsteps approach. Moments later, a well-groomed man in a dark suit entered the room. Acclimating itself to the new-old body, the spirit waited for the right moment to strike. As the man in the suit turned to retrieve a thin metal wand and switch on a noisy apparatus, it retrieved a scalpel from a tray of gleaming instruments. When the man turned back and leaned over the corpse, its eyes opened and flashed a wide, yellow-toothed grin. The man in the suit stumbled backward and, tripping over his own feet, fell to the floor. He stared wide-eyed as the corpse sat up and turned to look at him, then began to gibber when it stepped onto the floor and reached for him with a trembling, liver-spotted hand. The spirit briefly considered killing the man and taking his younger body, but opted to will him to sleep and take his clothes instead. The covenant allowed for a most specific tribute and it would not be found here.

As it waited for the sun to set, the spirit thought of the olden times when the faithful had sought to appease it. They knew it stood at the Last Threshold and only it could guard them from those things which dwelt in the Land of the Dead. Gathering in the places where the veils were thinnest, the faithful held great festivals in the spirit's honor. They danced naked and free around bonfires whose flames reached high as the midnight clouds. They roasted cats in wicker baskets that they might gain glimpses of things yet to come. The greatest of their offerings was the Wicker Man, a towering effigy filled with human sacrifices; once lit, the Wicker Man's glow filled the night as did the screams of those trapped within it.

But those days were long past. Armed with steel weapons and armor, invaders stole the sacred relics which were its touchstone to the mortal world and carried them across the wide sea. They did so without knowing the relic's true purpose, or of what slept within them. When the spirit awoke in the New World, it knew its time had passed. What even the Romans couldn't eradicate, ignorance had finally undone. Far from its place of power, the spirit had no more substance than a dream.

Dreams could be potent things. Each year when the sacred day arrived, the spirit had gone among the living and rekindled ancestral memories in the hearts and minds of those whose bloodline could be traced back to the Old Country. It sent dreams reminding them of the night when the veils were thrown back and the worlds of the living and the dead overlapped. In time the festival of Samhain was reborn as a new sort of tradition, one harmless enough for a people who no longer cared to roast cats or dance

naked and free beneath the light of a gibbous moon. And so, even if indirectly, the spirit received the recognition it craved. And by its own hand, the spirit would have the red tribute which was its due.

The spirit waited patiently for the sun to set. The veil would be especially thin at twilight as light gave way to shadow. There was power in the in-between places; doorways, borderlands and crossroads and in the in-between times of dusk, dawn and the stroke of midnight. That was where magic lay, in the neither-nor. And so, as the setting sun painted the horizon an angry shade of red, the spirit hid its waxy, slack-jawed face beneath sunglasses and a scarf then left the mortuary to walk amongst the living once more.

All around it, children in garish costumes rushed along streets which had the appearance of a single, endless slab of impossibly smooth stone. The children wore masks and makeup and carried bags filled with brightly wrapped sweets. If the children could have seen the lost souls, elemental spirits, and ravenous demons with faces like gaping wounds that walked hidden beside them, their laughter would have quickly turned to screams. For a moment the spirit was tempted to pull back the veil and show them, but decided against it. It wasn't completely heartless, after all. On this special night, the children were its flock. They knew not what they were truly celebrating, but they were celebrating nonetheless.

No one paid much attention to the bloodstained suit the spirit wore, for this was a night of costumes and grotesqueries and so it walked unmolested through the town. The spirit stopped at the first holy place it encountered but found it empty, as was the second and the third. At the fourth, it sensed the presence of life. High above the temple and mounted on a narrow steeple was the symbol which the faithful of the upstart religion held in reverence. That seemed strange to the spirit; crucifixion had been used by the Romans as a particularly brutal form of execution whereas the religion of the Carpenter's Son was said to be one of peace and love. Shrugging its bony shoulders, the spirit entered the temple.

The spirit did not like this place for it was consecrated to a most jealous god; not content with any one thing, this god had declared himself the Lord of All Things and because his worshippers believed it, so it came to pass. At the altar, the spirit paused to regard the plaster image of the Father-Son who had required a sacrifice so mighty only the Father-Son

himself would do. Creator of the universe or not, the god of this land certainly seemed taken with himself.

The spirit found that which it sought in an office in the back where a young priest sat writing at a desk. The priest looked up from his work, a sermon he was preparing for the funeral service of a Mr. Caleb Abernathy who had died of a stroke the previous week. It would be a particularly sad occasion. Able to trace their lineage back to the Old Country, the Abernathy's had been a fixture of the community since its founding two centuries past. With Caleb's death, the proud Abernathy line had finally come to an end.

At the sound of the spirit's approach, the priest stopped what he was doing and rose to greet his visitor. "Can I help you?"

The spirit removed the sunglasses then unwound the scarf and tossed it aside.

The priest's mouth fell open at the sight of the very man whose funeral service he would be conducting two days hence. "Mr. ...Mr. Abernathy?"

When the spirit had first awoken in this new land, holy men had tried to bind it within the relics where it once had slept. But the spirit was no hell-born demon. The words sacred to the holy men had no power over it. When the spirit had threatened to use its own power over the dead against them, the holy men had no choice but to enter into a covenant. Once a year, one of their own would be sacrificed as tribute. It was little compensation, but better than nothing at all. Over the decades, the covenant had been relegated to the stuff of legend then forgotten entirely. But the spirit had not forgotten. Even if by its own two hands, the spirit would have its due.

The time for the yearly ritual had come. The priest backed away as the spirit revealed the scalpel it had brought from the funeral parlor. Then it spoke in a quavering voice and, though its words were in the dead language of the Old Country, its intent was quite clear:

Now I rise from wormy earth
On this dark and sacred night
To demand the red tribute
Which is mine to claim by right
I stand before thee, O priest
Yet before me there are none
For I am lord of this land

Till dawn brings the morning sun

As the corpse approached, its features underwent a hideous transformation. First its mouth stretched out into an impossibly wide, gap-toothed grin. Then its eyes and nose began to sizzle and dissolve, running down its face in waxy rivulets that left tiny canals of melted flesh. A flame ignited within its skull, sending a flickering light streaming through its eye sockets, nasal cavity, and gaping mouth. The true face of Samhain stood revealed and the time of the red tribute was at hand.

“Dear God!” the priest cried. Back against the wall, he raised his hands defensively.

Now I rise from wormy earth, the spirit repeated, slashing the priest across the palms.

Clasping his bloody hands together, the priest closed his eyes. “Our Father who art in heaven—“

On this dark and sacred night...

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After the ritual was complete, the spirit re-donned the scarf and sunglasses, left the temple and headed back to the mortuary. The only people still on the street were teenage lovers and mischief-makers, both of whom gave the old man a wide berth without knowing why. When the spirit reached the parlor, it removed its stolen clothes and restored them to the mortician. When the mortician awoke, he would undoubtedly attribute the vision of Mr. Abernathy rising from the dead to a Halloween-inspired dream. Then the spirit returned to the cold metal slab, lay down and willed its borrowed face back to its original form. Soon Mr. Abernathy would be laid to rest. Then it would return to the sleep of oblivion as it had so many times before, dreaming of tributes past and yet to come as it waited for its day to come round again.



## TWICK OA TWEET

*Thomas M. Malafarina*

*“Conscience is no more than the dead speaking to us.” - Jim Carroll  
“Ghosts crowd the young child's fragile eggshell mind.” - Jim Morrison*

Not a single one of the residents of the quiet upscale subdivision of Wellington Estates understood why it was that their reclusive neighbor, William Elverson, divorced, age forty-eight, hated Halloween with such a passion. Because of Elverson's less than outgoing demeanor, no one ever managed to feel close enough to the man to ask him why that might be. Or perhaps they simply didn't care enough to try to discover the answer. But it was nonetheless obvious to everyone in the neighborhood that Elverson detested the holiday.

Every year the entire subdivision went all out to make the holiday a festive event with elaborate house decorations including lights, props and even a few animatronic displays. Some lawns were adorned with large cheerful-looking inflatable cartoon-like decorations. Others took a more sinister approach, having chosen to transform their frontage into frightening graveyard scenes. Ghosts, ghouls and goblins abounded, as did various incarnations of vampires, werewolves, zombies, famous Hollywood slashers and every monster imaginable.

A few of the residents even went to the next level of Halloween enthusiasm and converted their large two and three-car garages into makeshift haunted houses, complete with billowing gray fog and movie quality scenery with frighteningly realistic makeup and stereo sound effects. As a result, on Halloween night literally hundreds of revelers walked through the development with their children, turning the entire neighborhood into one big Halloween party. As the word spread, families from other neighborhoods made the pilgrimage to see what new ideas the folks managed to come up with.

But not William; he would not do a single thing to participate in the annual festivities. In fact, most people couldn't help but notice how every year on the evening of October thirty-first, when every other house in the neighborhood was aglow with Halloween decorations, William's house was in darkness and his car was nowhere to be found. Ironically, in many ways

the lack of decoration and the solitary darkness surrounding his home on Halloween night often made it seem more frightening and sinister than even the most elaborately decorated property.

William's absence likewise did not go unnoticed by the various kids of the neighborhood, especially those who were of the more malicious ilk. These creatively nefarious juveniles took the letter of the law when it came to "Trick or Treat" and felt that Elverson's obvious absence and snubbing of their favorite holiday granted them carte blanche to play whatever pranks they could imagine and even commit minor acts of vandalism on the man's property.

These hoodlums rationalized that if William had chosen not to be home on Halloween night to offer them treats then it was their right and perhaps even their duty to play any tricks on the man they deemed appropriate. As a result, every November 1st William awoke to find the trees in his front yard draped with long, flowing streamers of toilet paper. On more than one occasion he had returned to his property on Halloween night to find his doorbell taped down in the ringing position and the window to his storm door coated with soap-streaked vulgarities, obviously added by some of the more daring of the neighborhood kids.

On one unfortunate occasion, the legendary flaming bag of poo had been set afire, fortunately on his concrete walkway so no real damage was done to his home. That particular incident ended up being more symbolic than effective and in reality was an exercise in futility, since William never was home to rush from the house to stomp out the fire, completing the gag.

If the people of the neighborhood had taken the time to get to know William better, they might have possibly had a better understanding or at least an appreciation for his avoidance of the holiday. They would also know why he had been doing this every year since he was a child. But then again, William Elverson was not the type of person who cared enough to know or associate with any of his neighbors. He was a quiet, reclusive, antisocial man who tended to keep to himself. Even the neighbors living next door to William knew very little about him.

Elverson's lack of congeniality was largely the result of his melancholy disposition. Even before his divorce, he and his wife had been less than sociable but, since the split, he had become more of a loner and recluse. This made him seem an oddball of the neighborhood.

This aspect of his personality, however, had little to do with his displeasure with the Halloween season. That particular dislike was the result of an event that was much more horrifying and completely life changing. William had only been eight years old when an unspeakable tragedy had occurred, altering his personality forever.

William, who was known back then as Billy, and his best friend Jimmy Jenson had been trick or treating in their neighborhood on that fateful Halloween night forty years earlier. The two young boys had been friends forever, so it seemed, and every year they anxiously awaited the arrival of Halloween, one of their favorite holidays.

The two boys enjoyed dressing in costumes and pretending to be someone or something they were not, as all kids did. They also loved and anticipated filling their sacks with candy and treats. Although they had participated in the trick or treat ritual for as long as they both could remember, that particular Halloween night was a very special time for both of them.

It was the first year the boys' parents had consented to allow them to go from house to house unescorted. In the past, one or both of their parents had always gone along with them, waiting by the curb not only to protect them from any of the larger kids who might want to steal their treats but as a warning to the homeowners that they would be checking their boys' treat bags and the candies before either of them would be allowed to eat any of it. There had been reports in the newspapers in previous years about treat tampering, as well as urban legends of razorblades in apples and laxatives injected into chocolates and other such horrible acts. The presence of the parents was to serve as a deterrent to any such abhorrent behavior.

The lack of parental accompaniment that year was a significant turning point in both of the boys' young lives as it indicated they were no longer considered little kids but were now big boys; old enough to trick or treat on their own. This was especially important to Jimmy, who had been burdened with a very noticeable speech impediment—what many of the neighborhood children referred to as "baby talk." He said his Ls and Rs like Ws as in "Maawy had a wittle wamb," sounding a lot like the cartoon character Elmer Fudd. He had been going to special speech classes at the elementary school to try to break him of the speech defect, but progress was slow going. Billy didn't mind the way Jimmy talked because Jimmy was his best friend.

On that particular Halloween night, young Billy was dressed in a homemade pirate costume and Jimmy wore cowboy getup, complete with red felt hat and neckerchief. Billy had thought Jimmy's costume was a bit too young looking for him and did nothing to help him shed the baby image, which haunted him because of his speech. But as far as Billy was concerned, if that was what Jimmy wanted to wear, then so be it.

The night had been a very successful one for the both of them as they had made a good haul and their candy sacks were bulging with treats. Billy was tired and wanted to go home, but Jimmy was excited and wanted to try one more house before calling it a night. He pointed down the street, indicating he had found his final target for the night.

The house that Jimmy had chosen was the last one at the end of a street, which dead-ended at a vacant lot. Beyond the lot lay the edge of a local forest, cast in shadow beyond the glow of the streetlights.

Billy was reluctant to approach the house because it appeared to be a ramshackle wreck in such dire disrepair he doubted anyone actually lived there any longer. They did notice, however, there was an inviting light glowing on the paint-chipped ceiling of the dilapidated front porch, which was a signal all kids immediately recognized as the universal beacon of welcome for young costumed children on that most mysterious of nights.

The two boys approached the front stairs apprehensively, Jimmy taking the lead and Billy following a few cautious steps behind him. Billy suggested, "Jimmy. I think we should skip this place... it sort of gives me the creeps. Something just don't feel right about it."

"Aw, c'mon," Jimmy insisted. "Stop bein' such a baby, Biwwy. Theao ain't nothin wong with dis pwace. Pwobably some owd guy wivves here oa somethin wike dat." Billy had been so accustomed to hearing Jimmy speak with his baby-like quality that he had understood every single word the boy had said, even though he doubted others would have.

Ignoring Billy's protests, Jimmy boldly walked up to the rickety front door and knocked hard on its surface several times. The door seemed to rattle in its frame and the broken front window tinkled from the vibration as if threatening to fall out and come crashing onto the porch. When he didn't get a reply, Jimmy knocked yet again, harder.

Eventually, a gruff-sounding voice called out, "What d'ya want?" The tonal quality of the man's voice and a sinister sound that seemed to lie just beneath the spoken words, made Billy quake with fear. It sounded very

wrong and Billy got a strange sensation in the pit of his stomach. But Jimmy was not intimidated in any way by the strange tone and simply replied, "Twick oa tweet, Mista."

For a moment, nothing happened. Billy pleaded with Jimmy to leave the place and head home. He even considered turning and running away himself, but his feet felt heavy like they sometimes did in bad dreams. Then, before he could do or say anything, several things occurred in a matter of a few seconds. Billy saw these horrifying things played out as if watching a movie in slow motion. The overhead porch light went out, plunging the boys into total darkness. Before their eyes could completely adjust to the blackness and before they could even consider turning and running, the front door burst open inward with a rattling bang, the already cracked glass shattering and falling in a tinkling rain of shards somewhere inside the house.

As his eyes came into focus, Billy saw two grimy, scab-covered hands reaching out from the darkness of the house. They grabbed Jimmy's arms and pulled the now screaming child inside. For a moment, Billy stood in terror, mouth agape, unable to comprehend what he should do next. It was so much like a bad dream that he stood frozen with fear.

Then, reacting, not thinking, Billy did what any young defenseless boy would likely do in a similar situation. He turned screaming, dropping his cache of candy to the ground, and ran home in terror. The street was dark and deserted so there was no one around to hear his cries for help. He ran madly, occasionally venturing a glance behind him assuming some horrible denizen of the night was bearing down upon him. As he ran toward his house, the streetlights glistened like stars through his tear-filled eyes.

When he finally arrived home, Billy was confused and uncertain about what to do next. He wanted to scream for his mother and father but he felt ashamed of the tears flowing down his face. He wanted to be alone for a little while to figure out how he should handle everything. He was terribly worried about Jimmy but he was mixed up and unsure of what to think. He didn't want his family to see him crying like a baby, so he bypassed his brothers and sisters and hurried directly up to his bedroom where he crawled into his bed, pulled the covers over his head and sobbed uncontrollably.

After a few minutes his mother came into his room and asked Billy what was wrong. He tried to hold back his emotions but instantly broke

down. Tearfully, he recounted the events with as much detail as his terrified young mind would allow. His mother immediately called the local police then called Jimmy's parents. Within ten minutes, both had arrived at the Elverson home and, with Billy's guidance the group found the house where Billy said Jimmy had been abducted. Their spilled sacks of candy still covered the front porch, but Billy was no longer hungry for candy and didn't ever want to think of Halloween treats again.

The police eventually discovered the house was a vacant property but had not actually been abandoned. Its owner had recently passed away after years of being aged and infirm. That explained the dilapidated condition of the property. However, the electricity had not been disconnected. When they examined the house that night, the police found it was unoccupied, although they discovered the back door lock was broken, obviously the route the perpetrator had used to gain entrance and likely the same door he had used to make his escape. It was located on the forest side of the house so the vagrant was able to enter unseen. Other than the spilled bag of candy they found no trace of Jimmy.

Billy overheard one police officer tell his mother, "If your boy would have just told you sooner, maybe we could have gotten here in time to help Jimmy. But too much time has been allowed to pass. And now, to be honest, I'm afraid it just doesn't look very good." Billy was stricken with guilt and grief at the thought that his inaction was likely responsible for whatever might have happened to his best friend. But Billy knew he was just a little kid, he wasn't supposed to know what to do in such a situation. Heck, stuff like that wasn't supposed to happen to little kids. But this knowledge didn't help ease his young conscience.

After several weeks of futile searching, a hunter inadvertently came upon the boy's decomposed remains buried in a shallow grave in a nearby forest, still dressed in his Halloween cowboy costume; filthy with coagulated blood, rotting flesh and dirt. The young boy's corpse had been partially consumed by rats, birds, insects and a variety of other small forest creatures.

The medical examiner was able to determine that prior to his death; young Jimmy had been tortured and sexually assaulted. Eventually he had mercifully succumbed to his injuries. Then, even more than previously, young Billy found himself wracked with guilt, hearing the police officer's comments about him echoing in his mind over and over again. "If your boy

would have just told you sooner... would have just told you sooner... told you sooner... sooner."

From that day on, Billy never went out trick or treating on Halloween night again and each year stayed locked in his room, in bed with the covers drawn tightly over his head until the night was over. And as he hid in terror, in his mind Billy relived the horrible events of the night he lost his best friend.

Sometimes on the more disturbing Halloween nights, Billy believed he could hear tapping at his window and imagined he also heard a small voice in the wind saying "Biwwy... Biwwwy..." He imagined the small skeletal hands of his long dead friend scratching on the windowsill, trying his best to find a way inside; to get to Billy.

As an adult, each year for past forty years, William Elverson did everything in his power to avoid Halloween. When the rest of his neighborhood was busy greeting the throng of costumed children, he would leave his house for the evening, returning only after the 9:00 pm curfew; it was the only way he could make sure no children would come ringing his doorbell. He could not bear the thought of seeing them; he was filled with the irrational belief that one fateful day his long-dead friend might be hiding somewhere among them, waiting for his chance to get back at Billy for his unforgivable act of cowardice.

This Halloween night it had been raining heavily and, although it was only eight-thirty, William was certain there would be no more kids about, so he decided to break tradition and head back to his house a bit earlier than normal. As he suspected, his street appeared to be deserted. He pulled the car into his garage and quickly closed the door, keeping all the lights turned out. William sat in his family room at the rear lower level of his, home, watching TV, out of sight of the street. As far as anyone outside was concerned, his house appeared to be uninhabited, which was just fine with William.

After a few minutes, as he sat and watched television with the sound turned way down, William heard a light knocking at his front door. He tried to ignore it, until he heard it again, but louder. And then he heard the knocking once again, even more forcefully. William became irritated. He had his lights turned off and there was no reason for anyone to be knocking on his door. He had just about had enough of the neighborhood and the

damned kids who lived there. Who did they think they were? Didn't he have a right to his own privacy?

William decided he would go upstairs to the front door and give the apparently impudent child a stern lecture about his inappropriate behavior. He approached the front door and looked out through the peephole but could not see anyone at first. Then straining to look downward, he saw what appeared to be the top of a hat; a red felt cowboy hat of a variety he had not seen since his childhood. The hat appeared to be caked with dirt and grime.

William Elverson stood silent for a moment, a sick sinking feeling forming in the pit of his stomach. Cold droplets of sweat began to bead on the back of his neck quickly trickling along his flesh as an icy chill crept down his spine. He suddenly no longer felt like lecturing anyone and he heard himself asking uncertainly though the door, "What d'ya want?"

He immediately realized how frighteningly similar his now older croaking voice sounded to that horrible murderer's he'd heard coming from behind the door of the abandoned house on that Halloween night, so many years ago.

"Twick oa tweet, Mista," the voice said from the front porch with a baby talk quality William immediately recognized. He was certain what awaited him on the other side of the door. He realized, after so many years of avoidance, fate had finally caught up with him. He had tried to run for forty years but he could run no longer. It was time for him to face his destiny and if necessary to beg for forgiveness. His hands trembled with terror as they tried to grip the doorknob while wet with sweat.

William slowly opened the front door and looked upon the rotting remains of his once best friend, Jimmy Jensen, standing in his filthy shredded cowboy costume, his skeletal hand extended as if in anticipation of a treat. William looked into the creature's black-ringed dead eyes and imagined he saw the flesh sliding from the child's rotting face, as worms squirmed just below the surface of his skin, actively boring holes through the decaying flesh. In his mind he could smell the deep earthen odor from the undead child's former shallow forest grave.

The hideous creature again looked up at William and with a gap-toothed grin and said, "Twick oa tweet." The shock of this hideous ghost from his past was too much for William to bear; he collapsed to the floor in a heap, his heart stopping dead in his chest from the inconceivable horror of the blasphemous specter before him.

Later, after the ambulance had removed William's still cooling body and the police were asking their questions, the young boy, named Sammy Wilkins, still dressed in his amazingly realistic zombie cowboy costume cried openly, cradled in his father's arms. The boy was confused, not knowing what had happened to the strange man in the house who had come to the door, feeling like he might have done something to cause it to happen. His father assured him it was not his fault and that the man was probably sick.

Both Sammy and his father knew his Halloween costume was scary. After all, they had both worked very hard for several weeks to make it so. Sammy's father was a big Halloween enthusiast and amateur make-up artist, who enjoyed making costumes as terrifying and realistic as possible. However, he never thought that one of his costumes could have been realistic enough to have the potential to cause someone to die from fright. But apparently, he had been tragically wrong.



## PHASE TWO

*Brian Barnett*

Farmer Landon plunged the knife deep into the flesh and sawed a clumsy circle. He pulled the make-shift lid off and twisted his face a bit when the pungent odor reached his nose. He never could get used to the smell of the sweet ripeness.

He reached inside and felt the cold mess squish between his fingers. He pulled at the tendrils and shaved away the membranes until the inside walls were smooth and clean. Then he wiped his grimy hands on his jeans and began to carve a face – triangle eyes, a jagged smile – perfect for the season. He loved to decorate his pumpkins for Halloween.

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“I can’t watch this any longer!” Gordy said as he threw up a mess of seeds.

“Pull yourself together! You’ll watch and you’ll see why we have to act NOW!” demanded Jack. “The stories that were handed down from generation to generation are true, as you can see. The madman will stop at nothing to grow us for his own twisted amusement. Once he finds us to be suitable, he carves us into disgusting, twisted caricatures. No more, I say!”

Jack, the commander of the pumpkin patch, had led his pumpkin brethren to the back porch step to bear witness the meticulous slaughter of a former friend. What they witnessed, in their view, was the grotesque sense of humor by a megalomaniac farmer.

“Tonight!” shouted Jack. “Tonight, we begin Phase One!”

“Tonight!” the thousand or so other pumpkins cheered in unison.

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“Here’s a house!”

Soft thudding footfalls came across the grass as half a dozen children ran to the front door.

They made it as far as the porch before the first child screamed. On the porch was Farmer Landon’s head, hollowed and lit by a single candle. The

children yelled and ran back to the driveway, then giggled as they got back into their family van. Though they

got no candy, the thrill of such a realistic gag was plenty good enough for them.

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“They have found the lantern!” Gordy murmured. “Yours is far more frightening than any that Farmer Landon could ever create in a thousand growing seasons!”

“Quiet! Let the children scurry and tell the other humans of our existence,” Jack smiled smugly. “Yes, children are easily frightened by scary lanterns. They are like putty in my vines.”

“So now what do we do?”

“Phase One has set in motion a chain of complex events. Phase Two is coming soon. You just wait.”

Gordy sat silent for a moment, not sure if he should question his leader. But he felt it to be his duty to the other pumpkins to speak up. “What do you mean by ‘you just wait’?”

“That’s, that’s what I mean. You just wait. I said it very plain.”

“Do you know what Phase Two entails?”

“Well, of course I do! Do you think I’m a fool? Don’t you think I have a full understanding of the nature of our enemies? Did I not rally a thousand of our kind to defeat the evil Farmer Landon? Do you think I did that just so that we would not have a Phase Two? Jeez, I know Phase Two like the back of my stem.”

“I’m sorry, sir. Do you have an idea as to when Phase Two will be set into motion?”

“...you, you just wait. Seriously, I mean it. It’ll be glorious, man.”

And so they did wait. They waited and waited and waited. It wasn’t until a few weeks later that a local grocer, angry over lack of promised deliveries from Farmer Landon, visited the Landon residence.

It was then that he found a shriveled, rotting lantern made from Landon’s head. Torrents of maggots dribbled from Landon’s raison lips. The grocer went inside to call the police and found thousands of rotten pumpkins in the Landon home. It appeared as if one had been nailed to a wall before it rotted enough to fall to the ground again.

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Next year's brood of pumpkins offered conflicting stories to their children. The relatives of Jack argued that a glorious revolution was thwarted by a treasonous Gordy.

Gordy's camp argued that Jack was a complete imbecile who hadn't enough foresight to prepare for a real uprising and invasion. They praised Gordy for the mutiny that served as a symbol for the higher order of pumpkinkind.

Arguments went on for nearly the whole growing season. Now the fields are quiet. There seems to be an uneasy calm. Perhaps a pumpkin civil war is imminent.



## MURDER IN THE DARK

*Matthew Wilson*

I have always loved Halloween. The night of monsters.

Until I met one in the flesh

Jack waved the keys before us, smiling.

“Are you sure you want to do this? Last chance to run home to mommy.”

One by one I looked at the other two. The zombie, the mummy. We all wanted the money. No one chickened out. No one spoke and Jack gave us a look as if that was just too bad.

It had been a good party at first, then as it was tapering off, Jake had invaded our little camp, though the headmaster told us it was for first year pupils' use only. Every evening we came here after school to play computer games, pool, anything to deter us from burning buildings like other ten year olds. As long as we were clean and kept the noise down the headmaster let us have our fun. Especially as our parents paid for the benefits of getting us out the house.

Like a family of Meerkats we'd something of a security system going on, one small zombie would wait by the front door in exchange for free drinks all night, alerting us when someone - bird of prey or more likely bigger boy - approached. But tonight it had failed as Tommy was taking a whizz behind the bins at the time.

Besides, it was only one boy. Only Jack Ericson.

Which was like saying you've only lost one eye. You still another, but hell, an eye's an eye! He was bored and we were smaller, either he could take our money to buy cigarettes or we could entertain him by trying to make money.

He smiled and burst our balloons with the red hot tip of his cigarette one by one, with malice delight. His boots were covered by the squashed jack o lanterns outside he had delighted in jumping on. The few of us too big to escape through the windows backed into a corner, expecting a fight. Instead he told us he was taking us to a haunted house.

No thanks.

Last person in there wins a hundred pound.

Yes, please.

I'd heard of no haunted homes in our dullsville. No savage murderer or destructive act since the German bomb had landed on our park sand pit back in '42 two, staying there till '46 when no one had the guts to approach it finally went up with six houses, activated by a ten second hail storm.

The house was no B movie set of creaky doors and bats in the belfry. It was a modern abode, making me sure it was an old folks' residence of sorts. There were cars in the drive and lights in the window. Was this a breaking and entering job and Jack was setting us up like patsies to take the blame?

As expected he did not open the door with a key but rather kicked it open with dramatic flair as if a brave knight expecting some ferocious dragon on the other side. Instead there was only a foyer. The house was abandoned as promised, Jack had gotten the lights working earlier in the evening, so sure he could ensnare someone to take on the dare he'd been so kind as to buy brand new fuses. The cars belonged to the excess guests of a party across the street. The music was heaving but did not disturb the dust from the ceiling beams.

"Are you sure you want to do this? Last chance to run home to mommy."

I looked from one to another of my fellow trapped rats. Would he even let us leave after all the trouble of driving us over here? There was an air that we owed him, that as some small grain of appreciation we had to do this for him if for nothing else.

No one else threw up any argument and who was I to go against the grain?

"Aren't you going to stir us up? Tell us the secrets of the house, who killed who and how he's going to pick us off one by one?"

Jack wished us luck and headed for the door. "I think you'll find out all about that shortly before midnight."

Click - clack.

The beautiful vampire I had wished to talk to all night heard the lock turn and ran past me, toward the barricade. "Hey wait! You never said you were gonna lock us in!"

"Sorry, sweet cakes. There's a lot at stake here. One hundred notes and even with a button nose I don't trust you to play fair, you might change your mind and hightail it out of here, expecting to take my money with it. A guy's gotta protect his assets, you know."

For her I wanted to say more. But my voice failed me.

I was a werewolf, just one step up from dog. I could hardly overcome my fleas and anxiety, let alone angered dead men. In retrospect, along with me, I was glad she made it out of that hell hole alive. But by then she was completely crazy, of course.

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I suppose we all knew what we were in for when the taps started bleeding. Cards the zombie had snuck into his pocket soon got boring, even though they showed naked girls on the back and, though initially spooked when the taps pissed red, a calmer thought entered my head, just what the hell were we supposed to drink.

“Oh, ha, ha! Nice joke. But we’re here till morning, jackass. How are we supposed to make tea?” My fright added an edge to my voice. Was he out there listening? Enjoying the show? Surely after all the effort of locking us up in here like damn battery hens he wouldn’t come crashing through the window to throttle me. Surely people had called him worse. I felt safe in my prison, maybe I could call him more to impress my little blood drinker knowing he’d not get his hands on me till morning. When sunlight touched this property and ended our bet.

“Hey.”!

“Don’t kill me!”

I recoiled, cheeks burning when the polished nails drew back and the vampire smiled in an apologetic way like she’d stepped on my tail. “Sorry, watching as many horror movies as I do, I don’t reckon it’s a good idea we all wander off. I reckon there’s safety in numbers.”

My belly acid bubbled unpleasantly but I didn’t allow anxiety to show on my face. A dog was still better than a coward. “You expecting anything?”

“Well, you’re the one screaming. I nearly jumped out of my skin, what happened? You cut yourself?”

I saw she’d noticed the blood, my heart palpitated that she showed such concern. If her eyes opened so wide then surely she cared if I lived or died. Dropping the morbid topic of death seemed impossible in such Edgar Poe-like surroundings.

I almost pictured cute bunnies and sunshine. Nearly constructed a competent reason the taps menstruated. But then everything leapt from my

mind, as well as my mouth. It was not my doing for once.

The lights went out.

~~~

I jumped when I heard the slapping and briefly entertained the awful idea should I turn and look behind me there would be a grinning corpse stood at the window, tapping. Wishing to be let in and embrace me with her cold, maggot encrusted fingers.

In fact it was the vampire applauding. “Nice going, jackass. Real mature sense of humour.”

I was glad of the dark for the small matter it hid my fear. “You think he really did this?”

“Of course, he must have this whole place rigged with his little tricks. Misers trying to squeeze his money for every joke in the book. I found some words written in blood on the toilet wall too.”

“Words?” I invited more on her teasing fragment but she merely shook her head.

“I wouldn’t recommend it. You strike me as soft natured.”

Liable to faint? My secret was out.

“That a bad thing?”

“Not at all. Some girls go for that.”

Do not ask if she did. Do not ask-

“Ah.”

I forced my eyes off her as the lights came back on and, after wiping the fuzz from out of them as they adjusted, I followed her back into the foyer. “Don’t worry, I snuck some soda from the Halloween party. We gotta stick together, right?”

I was grateful for her strength, made a lame joke bribes would not endear me to share my half of my one hundred pound when the time came. But she wasn’t laughing. Nor was I. Not when we saw our other two house mates had completely vanished.

~~~

I like to think myself a rather down to earth person. Able to own up to the many things I would and could never posses. I would never be rich, never

have money. No castles. But on a more personal nature I'd never have courage. If not for the vampire beside me I know without question I would have screamed my head off.

Instead I only watched as again she applauded. Sighed. "Christ, not you, too. Moles."

I blinked. "Moles?" Ghost Moles?

"Jack must have gotten to them earlier in the day. No wonder Tommy never warned us he saw him walking down the drive. He was on his side."

I felt a strong connection build up between the vampire and me. Without them it was just us. Us against the world.

"I'm very disappointed!" she yelled at the walls. Then, softer, noted, "if they're not in the game then at least it means more dough for us."

"Then where did the blood come from? Look, it's in here too."

"With the taps and toilet I wouldn't be surprised if Jack has his own bank supply. You're not gonna scare us, guys. Come on, Ritchie. Take a seat and let the time pass."

Ritchie.

She knew my name.

God kill me now for my life would never be more perfect. I had thought cards so dull, but now alone with her there was nothing more in the world I wished to do. The world had no greater coming glory.

I looked up the staircase. "You think those two are up there watching us now?"

She smiled and dealt me a lousy hand. "Why, you plan on doing something?"

"No, God. No. I was just—"

"Take it easy. I'm only joking. I tend to do it a lot when nervous."

"Oh, don't be. I'm here."

I guess she didn't want to offend me so said no more. Having me as a bodyguard was a helpful as taking a safety pin into a war zone. After ten minutes it seemed I finally had a good hand, a slim chance of finally coming out on top. But then we heard it, the dull thud like a condemned man falling through the hangman's trap door that made my cards fly in all directions like a front lawn sprinkler spitting water. It came from upstairs.

My heart sank when I saw in her eyes; she was determined to go up and see what caused it. By all means please cut off my testicles and hand me a purse to put them into. Was I man or not? She didn't look at me with

grand expectations, but I couldn't let her go up there alone. With the aggressive track of Jack's pranks on the house mates, I dare say he might leap out from any cupboard and shave her hair off.

Happy Halloween.

"All right, let me go first."

"Are you trying to protect me?"

"No. If I got to run I'd rather not have you in the way of my escape."

"I hope you're joking."

"I hope I am too."

Carefully, quietly, we went upstairs. Shortly I would come down, but not all of the vampire would accompany me.

~~~

The upstairs was a maze of unused and abandoned bedrooms no one cared to call home save fat spiders dancing beneath the skirting boards. There was nothing in the bathroom, nothing in the master bedroom. Nothing in the attic and last but not least nothing in the towel cupboard.

Nothing but Jack's dead body.

I know nothing of death as my parents are young and in the prime of life. I have a few older, wealthy aunts but they have not seen fit to entrust me in their wills and shuffle off this mortal coil. By the neat incision in his throat it seemed immediately obvious that Jack had died quite quick. Beside the frozen mask of fear etched on his face, betraying a final last moment on earth, I wished to suffer no similarities.

At first, with how quick she moved, I thought the vampire beside me was falling. Fainting. But instead she strode boldly forward and searched his pockets.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm not here for my health. Where's the money? If some ghost killed him then they couldn't have a use for it. It must be here. It must!"

There seemed so many things wrong with that sentence, then and there my mind horrified by her disconnection to death. He must be dead, right. I couldn't touch him, tried to raise my hand to check his pulse but it fell away like a clumsy attempt at a wave. He was hung there like a freaking coat rack.

"We have to get out of here! What are you - leave the money!"

"If you want out that's fine with me. It means more for little old - ha, ha! Look!"

I had never seen so much money in my life

So much green. It matched her eyes. Her mad, bulging eyes. "Mine, mine," she chirped. "No one's taking this, not now!"

It was my first time of seeing a dead body, though I hoped I was not drooling as much as her. "He looked like my grandfather, you know. When they took me to the church and he was laid out there like cold meat. I was young, so they told me he was sleeping, like that would help. He was just lying there, asleep. With his eyes open."

I had to get her out of there with all possible speed, which obviously wasn't going to happen. Not when the lights went out again and the only sound I could hear was the dead woman laughing as she knocked her nail against the window and asked to be let in.

~~~

Dear Ms Walker,

Please do not think I killed your son, Jack.

I have never possessed a thread of heroism. Nor has jealousy made a home of my heart. He was far too old for the vampire.

Dear Ms Sallan,

How is your daughter? They refuse to let me send flowers from here.

I hope she is close to talking now so she can tell you what happened. It has been many weeks since she was struck about the head, never to wake, to unravel the many strings of doubt that have been wound round my good name while I rot in these padded walls.

The doctor says I suffer blackouts, moments when a cape of darkness completely covers me and I am not myself. Something inside me is released and my basic urges come to the surface. He says I wished to be a hero. To fight and kill the others who may harm or entice the advances of my love.

My vampire.

I don't want the money. I just want to go home. I don't like it here. Sometimes at night the dead woman knocks on the walls, wanting to come

in. She laughs at me, tells me awful things. Lies that I have not done. I am quite sure of that.

I'm too tired to write now. Something stirs painfully in the back of my mind.

The lights are going out again.

THOUGHTS OF THE DEAD

Ken L Jones

Beneath the moldy pine needles
All that is decaying there is still moving
As it crawls out of the putrescence
Of dead bones with a golden throbbing glow
Till it inches into the sunlight
By scratching this half formed intelligence
Calm in the crumbling splinters of its juicy fingers
Towards hollow logs that smell like carrion long rotten
And as sunlight tears it apart all bloody warm
Until the shapeless dusk raises its sinister head
And its failing light open and staring
Milks all that now most assuredly smells long dead
And its incautious footprints in this mangy woods now become
Perfumed with mold tear up all with its liquid essence
As it shears the trees and send shadows dancing
Until the slimy forehead of morning arrives
With its shapeless curious face
And causes the very presence of death to scream in reply
And it assimilates all that has been dismembered
Until it isn't anything more than a skeleton
So moist and bleeding that it sure smells rotten
Dead and tuneless in the murderous muck
Where the devouring of the rustling bush's
Overpowering voiceless odor
Muddy and frail and dangling
In the agony that shuffles around reeking of slime covered breath whose
Silent moments of faceless horror are
A cloven monster clad in layers of the pale drifting skull
Of a brook that is so silver laughing that it must have crawled
Out of the dead dreams of some child who will forever scream at night
As Hell intended when it first set in motion such a fright
To rock the waking world of man before it is put away in coffins
And all that gives peace or succour or delight

Moves no more and is in eternal night.

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

J.J. Smith

Brian Harrington was unceremoniously escorted into a chair on the presenter's side of a very long conference table in the meeting room reserved for the company's board of directors. He had dreamed of sitting at this table, but not in the hot seat. Not as the scapegoat for his company's biggest flop that year. Even though it wasn't his fault that the flame-retardant Halloween costumes went up like they were dipped in gasoline, he knew he was going to be grilled about how it happened.

Sitting directly opposite Brian was the Chairman of the Board and in between the two sat the company's top leadership. The Chairman spoke, "Mr. Harrington, you're here today to explain how this fiasco occurred. Would you like to get started?"

Sweat poured down Brian's forehead as he thought of what to say. Normally, he was quite good at making presentations, but he wasn't given a chance to prepare, so words were eluding him.

"Mr. Harrington the board is very busy, so if you'd start explaining."

"I didn't know they switched materials. If I'd known I'd have sounded the alarm."

"Wasn't that your account? Therefore, wasn't it your job to know?"

"Yes, it was my job to know and I made regular trips to Thailand and toured the factories. I returned home with product samples that our lab tested. They were cleared."

"Yes, the board knows all about your overseas adventures, we'll get to them later. So you deny any collusion with the manufacturer to defraud the company by producing substandard merchandise and pocketing the funds not spent on flame-retardant material."

"I wasn't involved."

"Shouldn't you have known?"

"I guess so."

"You 'guess so'?"

"I should have known."

"I agree, but instead of focusing on the job while in Thailand, you indulged your perversions."

"What?"

Motioning to a large screen television behind Brian, the Chairman said, “Run the tape, please.” Immediately, a picture of Brian on a Bangkok street appeared on the screen. The video was dark, but clear enough to see he was in the company of two boys about ten years old and they were entering a hotel. “Enough!” the Chairman said, and the television went dark. “Where did you procure those boys?”

“What?”

“Where did you procure those boys? How did you get a hold of them? Did you go through a flesh peddler? I know you wouldn’t risk walking up to a street vender, there’s too much chance of a police operation, so you had to go through a broker. Who was it?”

“Mr. Wu at the factory, he provided the boys.”

“Did Mr. Wu also provide you with the cloth samples? Were they waiting for you in Mr. Wu’s office?”

“Yes.”

“Shouldn’t you have overseen the collection of those samples from a random lot?”

“Yes.”

“So, Mr. Wu distracted you from your duties by making it possible for you to indulge in your pederast desires, very clever of him. If he hadn’t created a serious delay in this project’s agenda, I’d consider hiring Mr. Wu,” the Chairman said. He then leaned to his right and whispered something to a board member who Brian recognized as the company CEO.

The CEO nodded, and then pointed to a man standing by the door. The man left the room and the Chairman again spoke. “There’s one more thing the board wants you to see before you leave, Mr. Harrington. We’ve arranged a demonstration of what possibly could have happened if this problem hadn’t been discovered in time.”

“Do I still have a job?”

“Of course, the company will continue to employ you, but in a much diminished capacity. Tonight you’ll report to the chief of the custodial staff of this building. I hope you do a better job for the company emptying waste baskets than you did managing this account.”

“You want to make me a janitor. Fuck you! I’ll quit. Tailor, Campbell and Fellows will snap me right up.”

“To do what Mr. Harrington, manage their prison accounts? Sever your relationship with this firm and I’ll have no choice but to provide the

authorities with a copy of this tape. You would be lucky to be incarcerated in a U.S. prison, but I'll see to it that you're extradited to Thailand. Are you prepared for that?"

"No."

"Then shut up, you fool, and watch the television."

The television screen again showed images, but they weren't recorded, they were live. The picture was of two children, a boy and girl. They were wearing Halloween costumes, which Brian recognized as the company's "Little Witch" and "Kid Vampire" models. He also recognized his 5-year-old daughter Angela and his 6-year-old son Jake. "What is this? Why do you have my kids!?" he said, bolting up from his chair.

"Sit down, Mr. Harrington!" the Chairman replied and two burly guards suddenly flanked Brian. Each put a hand on his shoulders and pushed him back into the chair. The guards made it clear that Brian was going to watch the television and once he seemed to accept there was nothing he could do, in a calmer tone, the Chairman said, "Watch and learn."

On the screen the children each held something and Brian could see that whatever it was they held was furry and moved. He then realized they were holding some kind of small animals.

The Chairman then leaned toward the conference phone on the middle of the table and said, "Children, put the hamsters back in their cages for now. You can play with them later." As quickly as youngsters their age could, the children placed the animals in a cage at their feet and stood, motionless, seemingly waiting for further commands. "Now the nice man who gave you the costumes and showed you the hamsters is going to show you where to stand," the Chairman said.

On the screen, a man appeared and pointed to the floor and said, "Stand on the marks." The children then moved to where he pointed.

"What's going on? What're you doing?" Brian said, his voice starting to sound desperate.

"Just a little demonstration, Mr. Harrington," the Chairman said. As the Chairman spoke, the television screen went black for a few seconds and stayed that way until two small glowing lights appeared.

Brian concentrated on the screen and quickly realized the glow was actually flames. Within seconds, light that had been no bigger than candle flames grew upward providing enough light to show that the "Little Witch"

dress and the “Kid Vampire” cape were burning like paper. “Stop!” Brian screamed. “Stop this! Help them! They haven’t done anything! You’ve killed them!”

“No, it’s you who would have killed them!” the Chairman responded. “But no one has been harmed. Look for yourself.”

Brian again focused on the screen. By then, the lights in the room where the broadcast originated had been restored and he recognized the company’s testing lab, but more important, he saw two scorched manikins.

“You can leave now, Harrington,” the Chairman said. With the Chairman’s dismissal as their signal, the two security guards pulled Brian to his feet and led him out of the room. They escorted him to a waiting room where he found his wife, Jennifer.

She ran up to him and said, “Are you alright? They said there was an emergency and that I needed to meet you. They even had me pick up the kids from school. Brian, I didn’t have to tell them the school’s address, they just stopped in front of the school and said to get the kids.”

“And you just went in and got them?” he said.

“They didn’t give me any choice. Besides, I was scared and this happened so fast, I really wasn’t ready for it. Once we got here, they led us to this room and then they gave the kids those costumes. They said it was for market research.”

“You let them put them on?”

“I was confused and not thinking straight. Sure, it seemed weird to me that they would do that but I thought it was like, you know, giving kids toys to keep them busy while the adults talk. Once they handed them to the kids, it would have been harder to get them to give them back. I wasn’t prepared for what happened after that. Once the kids put the costumes on, they followed those guys right out of the room. The guys didn’t even say anything, or ask me if they could go with them. The kids just stood up and walked out the door. I thought they must have called for us, and I just didn’t hear, so I was right behind the kids asking the guards—I guess that’s what they are—where they were taking us now, but the guards wouldn’t let me leave the room. I tried walking around one, but he slapped me. I couldn’t believe he hit me. I was stunned and started crying and before I could get myself together, they shut and locked the door. It was locked until you came in. Brian, what’s going on?!”

"It's nearly over, and no one's been hurt," he said. "I saw the kids, they're okay. The company really is doing some market research."

"Research! One of them hit me and kidnapped our kids! What kind of research is that?"

"Just calm down, this isn't what I'd hoped for, but we'll come out of this alright. I don't know how much more data they need, but the kids will be here soon and we can go."

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While the parents speculated on the type of market research the company was conducting with their offspring, the board reconvened in the company's "temple room," a place where no cameras were allowed. A large inverted cross dominated the wall behind a stone altar that was brown and crusty from previous rituals. In front of the altar stood Angela and Jake, to whom the Chairman said, "Why don't you go ahead with show and tell?" The children nodded and moved behind the altar where two booster steps had been placed. They ascended the booster steps to find the two hamsters—each in an individual cage—they had been playing with earlier. Next to each cage was a plastic quart bottle of lighter fluid, a lit candle and a wick. Each child picked up the bottle of lighter fluid—the childproof tops of which were already open and which had been emptied of half their contents so young arms could easily manipulate them—and liberally squirted the combustible liquid into the cages. Each child took great care to soak their respective animals. In a vain effort to find a place to hide, the terrified creatures ran around their cages in frenzy. In addition, the fumes from the fluid began to accumulate in the cages and may have been driving the animals mad, for each creature reacted as if it had an idea of what was to come. In a last ditch effort at escape, the hamsters bit at the metal bars to gnaw an opening. "That's enough fluid," the Chairman said, and the children stopped dousing the cages.

The youngsters then picked up the wicks, lit them on the candles' flames, and stepped off the booster steps. They turned and carefully tossed the lit wicks into the sloppy pools of lighter fluid that surrounded each cage.

Heat from the resulting rush of flame was felt throughout the room, but none of the board members was concerned about the fire getting out of control, for the altar room was designed to handle such burnt offerings.

The children watched fascinated and amused as the fire engulfed each cage, leading to the horrible deaths of the hamsters. Both children pointed to their act of arson and gleefully chanted “Die, hamster, die! Die, hamster, die!” The youngsters continued the chant even after the lighter fluid had burnt off and all that was left of the hamsters was blackened remains.

“That’s enough now, children,” the Chairman said. “Wasn’t that fun?”

The children nodded in unison and Jake eagerly asked, “Can we do it again?”

“Next time you visit. Right now we have to take you back to your mother. We’ve arranged a surprise pizza party in your honor, complete with balloons and a magician. You like magic, don’t you?” Answering his own question, he said, “Of course you do, everyone loves magic.”

Excitement filled the children and Angela said, “You’re a nice man.”

The chairman smiled and said, “Thank you, my dear.”

Directly behind the chairman was the CEO who said, “I don’t see what this proves. The incantation works, even on this non-flame retardant material that we weren’t aware of at the time it was cast, but we already knew the spell would work.”

“What did we learn? We learned the girl shows just as much aggression and malice toward the assigned target as the boy, that’s what we learned.”

“Again, the incantation works, so why don’t we just move the costumes to another market?” the CEO debated.

“We’re not dumping these costumes on another market because that could make things worse. Right now we can blame the reckless disregard for the consumers’ children’s safety on the manufacturer, and we wouldn’t be lying. But what would happen if we dumped these costumes on another market and the same fire hazard issue is raised in the press? Hasn’t enough attention already been focused on our company, or should we place ourselves under more scrutiny? Such a stupid action might get the wrong people to ask questions we don’t want asked. Think of what would happen if the company were caught in a lie. No, it’s too risky. Therefore, all of the costumes are to be recalled and destroyed.”

“I don’t get it, why destroy them? To get the company’s investment back we’ll need them as evidence.”

“You talk as if we’re in this venture to make money. Because we’re going to cut our losses and focus on next year, this year will be a red line

year for this project. But, there had better not be a repeat of this year's mistakes.”

“I still don't get it.”

“Don't you know anything about mothers?”

“Not really, mine whored in a brothel. When I turned 16 I killed her pimp and took over the place. She was one of my top earners.”

“The fact that you showed such ruthlessness at a young age is why you run this company, but I see there are some gaps in your knowledge, so I'll enlighten you. That the costumes might burn up while being worn can create anxiety among mothers and they might react negatively by actually making Halloween costumes for their brats rather than purchasing ours from the grocery store, or pharmacy or wherever they shop. If that happens, it could be a potential disaster for this project, because if we want to increase recruitment of potential followers, we have to get them to wear the costumes, preferably youngsters. Children are naturally mean, we can nurture that. All it takes is one wearing and we can influence the wearer's behavior. While a negative reaction to the lack of fire retardant is not desirable, it's not the worst that can happen. A backlash that drives people away from celebrating Halloween would be much worse. We won't risk that, so fresh stock will be ordered from a new manufacturer. Why, it's our corporate social responsibility,” he said with an insincere smile. “For siding with safety over profits we'll only get favorable press, possibly an award, that's why business organizations exist, don't you agree?”

The CEO still looked puzzled.

The Chairman continued, “However, you're right about one thing; we will eventually make use of the existing costumes. I said they'd be destroyed, but I didn't say when or how. That will occur immediately after a contract is signed with a new manufacturer. When that's done, the current costumes will be incinerated in such a way that the factory that produced them and everyone who had anything to do with producing those worthless goods, will spontaneously combust. For that reason we will continue to contract with Thai manufacturers because nothing really drives home the message that they better not fuck with us than scores of agonizing deaths. Now if you'll excuse me.” The Chairman then turned to the children and said, “We want you to have fun on Halloween, but your mommy and daddy said you can't keep the costumes we gave you. Your parents don't want you to have fun. They're like very bad hamsters and someday you'll teach them

a lesson. But you can still have lots of fun on Halloween. Do you want me to tell you how?"

The children looked up and smiled.



## GRANDMA'S HOUSE

*Neil Leckman*

For the last 250 years many people have gone missing around the town of Dreadmill. This happened at different times of year but they could all be traced back at some point to the house that lies at the back of Devil's Churn. It was an odd little place built on a patch of ground that is a jumble of stones, many that resemble animals or demons if the light is right. It got the name Devil's Churn because it looks like the place was damned by the devil then churned up to bring all the dead things to the surface. Not many folk go back up into the Churn unless it's to do business with Grandma Mather, the old woman who has lived there as long as everyone can remember. Some say that she has been there as long as the stones themselves, but that's just silly talk, isn't it?

Grandma Mather makes lotions and potions as she calls them, some for what ail you, others for what fails you. Truth is she was in thrall to the land and it exacted a price for her immortality, lives, young ones if possible. The only time that there were a lot of people around Grandma Mather's house was Halloween, the one time of year that she welcomed anyone who visited. She always gave out homemade candy that was to die for - and many did. They were unaware that the candy Grandma handed out came in two varieties, regular and her special mixture. Nobody could ever tell the difference between the two, but Grandma knew. Both candies tasted dreamy, much better than any store bought stuff. The special ones had an extra mixture of herbs that didn't change the taste at all. What they did was cause a slight variance in the PH of the person who ate them and added a slight scent that only certain animals, and demons, could smell. It wasn't until a family moved into town from the big city that people found out what was happening out at Grandma's house.

Come Halloween night the girl, Sandy, was out trick or treating with her friends, her dad coming along just to keep an eye on her. She came to Grandma's house and as everyone got a piece of her homemade candy, the father stepped forward. He took the piece of candy from his daughter and looked at it.

"How do I know that you didn't put some ground glass or chunks of razor blades inside this candy?" he asked Grandma Mather, since things like

that happened sometimes in big cities.

"Why, because I've always handed out my candy on Halloween and never with something nasty like that inside," she said, smiling at him.

"So if I handed you this piece of candy, you'd willingly eat it?" he asked.

"The children will tell you that my candy is always good," she said, still smiling at him.

"Yes, but that isn't what I asked, is it? Would you eat this candy?" he asked again, holding it out in front of her face.

"Why would I want to eat your daughter's candy?" she asked, now with a little less of a smile on her face.

"Why? Because I don't trust handmade candy. Too many children have been tricked into eating candy that killed them over the years!!" he said, still shaking the candy in front of her face.

In the meantime a crowd had begun to gather behind Sandy's dad. Amongst them were a couple of the adults from town. They were beginning to wonder why she didn't just take the candy from him and eat it. A couple of voices quietly asked, "Why not?"

Now the smile was gone and she frowned at Sandy's father. "I would think you'd be happy I spent so much time making this candy by hand. It isn't easy for an old woman like me to do that. It takes days to make enough for all of the children." She turned to go back into the house when he reached out, grabbed her arm and turned her back around.

"Now I want to see you put this candy in your mouth. Do that and I'll leave quietly with my apologies. If you don't I'll file a complaint with the police department to come out here and look into how you make your candy," he said, now backed by more voices, less the quietly now.

She reached out and took the candy from his hand, slowly untwisted the wrapper and placed it in her mouth. "There, does that make you happy?" she asked.

"My apologies for being so tough about it, but where we come from there are some pretty creepy people and they like to hurt children," he said as he backed down from the porch and turned to leave.

"Don't you want one for your daughter?" she asked.

"No, you ate that one; it wouldn't be fair to some other child if you ran out." He continued walking and faded into the night.

When everyone had left, she ran back into her house and took the candy from her mouth. It had been one of the treated ones and now she needed to find a way to counteract the spell put on it. Before she could, though, there was a billowing of smoke and a fierce demon appeared before her. He stood seven feet tall, with leprous skin that was covered in oozing blisters and glowing red eyes. “So you have been marked?” he asked.

“It was an accident,” she said, her head bowed.

“You, know the agreement. You could live until the day you were marked. On that day the years would wear heavily upon you and our deal would be done.”

“Yes, but it was an accident!” she said with a quaver in her voice.

“There are no accidents!” he bellowed, reaching out for her. At his touch her skin blistered and flowed from her like hot wax. Her screams of agony carried into the cold night air. She flowed into a pile that turned to ash and blew into the night.

Children heading towards her house stopped at her cry and looked up to see a winged demon rise through the roof of her house, which burst into flames as it rose high into the sky in front of the full moon. It looked down at them, laughed and vanished. Her house crumbled into a pile of jagged, burnt timbers that folded into the ground and were gone. Some people said it must have been a gas leak from a subterranean sink hole that caused the house to burn like that, but the children who were there that night never went near the Churn again, nor their children.

Now it’s just a place of bad omens and giant stone animals that everyone avoids. Go there if you wish, but be careful where you step, because people still vanish from time to time and the smell of Grandma’s candy hangs heavy in the air when they do...

## THE PUMPKIN REVENGE

*Mathias Jansson*

They cut my head and ate my brain  
They stabbed me right into the face  
And put a candle in its place  
With a horrifying grin of light  
I was placed on a cold doorstep  
In the autumn night

But I took my revenge  
When small children came  
So sweet and innocent  
Screamed ‘trick or treat’  
Placed their little hands in the jar  
To take a chocolate bar

Then I took my revenge  
I enjoyed every little piece  
Of their young meat  
Bloody fresh and candy sweet



## A CREEPY DEAL

*Olivia Arieti*

The old house, abandoned and lost in the countryside, beyond which stretched the ever haunting moors, had remained uninhabited for a very long time and was just what Gary was looking for. He had a solitary disposition and was tormented by unresolved matters, so he decided to move in with his second wife, Judy.

Both were looking for peace and quiet and wished to escape the city after the sad events that had befallen them. Their previous partners had died in sudden and rather mysterious circumstances. Neither knew exactly what brought them to marry again, probably the necessity to avoid solitude for Judy and the attempt to forget and change life completely for Gary.

The decaying structure was surrounded by such barren trees that the wind found no resistance and blew wild and incessant, making the shattered windows slam continuously so that the light flickered in and out, creating a ghostly contrast in all rooms.

“We must fix those shutters,” Judy remarked, “can’t stand that banging any longer.”

“Better start the fire first,” her husband replied. “It’s getting cold here,” and immediately put logs and sticks in the huge fireplace.

“Probably it’s been a mistake to come,” Judy continued, glancing around. Also having married again, she thought but kept that consideration to herself. “The place is too gloomy... We should change the furniture at least.”

“Not today, love, I have other things on my mind.”

Judy looked at him inquisitively, but he ignored her glance and kept building the fire.

They were neither happy nor unhappy on the whole and carried on with some sort of companionship that seemed to keep them together, despite their evident lack of deep feelings.

“Too bad we have no friends here,” Judy said, “otherwise we could have a party, tonight’s Halloween.”

The idea of spending the eerie evening alone with her husband made her feel most uncomfortable.

"Certainly some of the old ghosts will show up," he said a little nervously. "There must be plenty of them around here." He went out of the house and came back with a very big pumpkin.

His wife was amused by the unusual idea and watched him cut out the eyes, nose and mouth and take out the flesh.

"There, we'll keep those evil spirits away now." After putting a torch inside the jack-o-lantern, he placed it in the front garden.

When he came back he uncorked a bottle of wine and served it. "The party's about to begin, my dear."

Judy missed her childhood Halloweens. She truly enjoyed the dreary night with all its spooky fun; the old ghost stories were her favourites; unlike Gary, she never believed in spectres and always dismissed the possibility of their existence with a sort of scornful superiority.

That night, though, she felt less confident and attributed that fact to the awful weather and most of all to the creepy place where they had ended up.

To add to it, undistinguished sad moans could be heard and Judy noticed her husband becoming more and more agitated. He kept filling up his glass and had already taken out another bottle.

After her second glass of wine, she asked, "What happened to your first wife, Gary?"

"We set some rules, love; one was never to ask about our past and to be content with what each felt like saying."

Judy pensively sipped her drink, watching the flames flickering. It was true, when they got married they promised never to give away what they didn't feel right in saying but somehow the urge to get to know her husband better had prevailed.

Her unexpected question, though, obviously annoyed Gary who nervously drained his glass.

Drinking heavily had become one of his favourite pastimes.

"Seems our friends have been delayed," he said, casting a wistful glance out of the window.

Judy looked out, too, wondering who would dare to come round on such a dreary evening. Was he waiting for someone in particular?

With a wicked smile, she said, "Probably they stood you up."

Gary looked at her, his face furious and, without another word, he stumbled up the staircase and staggered to bed.

It was almost midnight when a heavy rain began striking against the panes; the room was getting cold as the fire was dying.

She was about to feed coals and woods to it when a hand tapped at the window and a hollow woman's voice begged to be let in.

Terrified, Judy stepped back but then recalled all the creepy stories of hands tapping at panes. With a scornful laugh she opened it and shouted, "Sure, come on in, whoever you are!"

A sudden whirlwind blasted into the room and, to her amazement, it turned into in a figure with a waxen face wrapped in a cloth that resembled a shroud.

It had to be the result of all the wine she had been drinking. She closed her eyes and opened them again, only to realise the horrid creature was still there.

"You shouldn't have come here, love."

"Who are you?" muttered Judy, rigid with fear.

"Melissa, your predecessor." She added, "Tonight I've come for my husband, dear, better step aside." A sinister laugh followed. "Your jack-o-lantern is phoney!"

Then Gary rushed downstairs and hugged the macabre figure. Before Judy's astonished eyes they dropped to the floor in a wild embrace. Their screams resounded loudly and passionate cries filled the room.

Then, suddenly, the ghost disappeared from Gary's arms, leaving him delirious with lust.

He got up and looked at Judy with bloodshot eyes. "Why do you think Melissa came here? She still wants me despite my stabbing her to death." He ran out of the house, rushing after the spectre through the pitch-black darkness.

Judy remained speechless. It was a nightmare, couldn't be otherwise; and her husband's ravings were due to his drunkenness, surely.

The flames were almost out and the logs were creaking painfully as if consumed by the agony of the fire; the macabre figure was still in front of her and Gary's hands were dripping with blood.

Could her husband really be a murderer? Probably, he also wanted another victim.

She closed her eyes and this time resolved not to open them.

Fortunately, that horrible night of Halloween would soon be over.

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The chill and dampness of the first November morning arrived punctual as usual. It had stopped raining but menacing clouds still billowed above.

"So you're a murderer?" Judy asked, still incredulous, as soon as Gary entered the room.

"Melissa had become the harlot of our neighbourhood, that's why I couldn't take it anymore, had to preserve my dignity," he replied and added, "Also yours, my dear, your ex-husband was a frequent visitor of her bed as well."

"No, no, you're lying," cried Judy in desperation. "Martin loved me; never would he have done such a thing."

The mystery of Melissa's death had been revealed but Martin's deceitful behaviour was hard to accept.

As if reading her thoughts, Gary sneered, "If you don't believe me, ask her, she'll certainly come back one of these nights. She knows I can't stop loving her. Better get used to that."

Suddenly everything appeared clear, Gary had brought her to that solitary place where he was sure Melissa's spectre would come; all the unsettled spirits of people who died a sudden and violent death of her ghost stories came back to her mind, all unable to rest in peace and doomed to endless roaming.

When Judy implored him to go to the police, Gary, flushed with anger, got up, took a knife and pointed it at her. "Don't you dare ever say that again or I'll cut your throat before you step out of that door!"

Then he put down the weapon and left the room, cursing and damning both women.

Judy ran out into the moors, brushed by the wind and the drizzling rain that had started to fall. Somehow she secretly nourished the hope of meeting the spectre and asking for the truth about her dead husband.

She wandered desolate along the stony paths as ominous howls and shrieks resounded all around. Sinister shadows seemed to stretch out before her as well, but the fear of Gary's threat was stronger than that eerie atmosphere. Now also insanity had become a threat; she was considering spectres as real people and that frightened her.

She saw a figure approaching and realised it was Martin's ghost. He, too, was clad in a shroud on which the frost sparkled with such intensity

that he looked more like an angel than a spectre. She was about to run away but his clammy hand grasped her arm. The emaciated white face appeared so consumed with pain that it inspired more pity than fear.

“So you cheated on me, did you?” were the first words that poured out of her hurt heart.

The ghost nodded sadly, “I fell madly in love with Melissa but realised it was a mistake and regretted it.” The sepulchral voice continued, “Unfortunately, Gary found out and in a fit of jealousy murdered me.”

“Gary?” she cried startled.

“It’s been useless. Melissa never wanted to be loved, she was too vain and greedy, a cruel woman. When Gary realised that, he stabbed her to death as well.”

“I shall never forgive you,” were the only words Judy managed to utter.

“Perhaps you could try, sweetheart...” said the tormented spirit, “I love you and will go on loving you forever.”

Judy’s face was covered with tears; her heart was still throbbing for Martin despite his deceit and her new marriage.

“There must be a way out, darling, I can’t think of roaming in this wilderness without you” he cried before a flash of lightning split the sky in two and the spirit vanished in its blurring light.

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When Gary returned home Judy was huddled on the couch sobbing desperately.

He moved slowly to the window and looked out with a wistful glance.

Both couldn’t hide their feelings any longer, devoured by the consuming passion for their former partners. An inexplicable force like a macabre magnetism, attracted the disconsolate souls together, whatever their insistence.

An unusual deal was made; Judy and Gary would live there as friends only, and each would be free to see their ghosts whenever they wanted.

From then on the two spectres began visiting the house assiduously; a portal had opened, enabling them to connect with the world of the living and continue the existence so violently interrupted.



## ZOMBIE FADES TO DUST

*Ron Koppelberger*

It was Halloween night and the fathers of substance, the alchemy of what was growing toward the silhouette of the moon, was what he anticipated in anticipation of the kill. “Fire, damn!” he said in a whisper to the rose bushes and the plastic pink flamingos. He was waiting in the side yard for the symbol of his wont, the want to take and dissect and destroy the vestiges of human acclaim, the evenings trick or treaters had long since dissipated.

He had killed so many times that the repetition became a kind of déjà vu; he felt it in his bones, to the core of his demeanor and soul. The last had been disappointing; he had screamed and died of heart failure. He had stood there poised with the knife and ball of yarn. The bag of rock salt in his pocket had seemed heavy. “Zombies, all zombies!” he said aloud to himself. He had killed and killed and still they were there, as the day and the night, sure and unbidden by his anger. They were all zombies, mindless constructions of flesh. He had his rock salt, though; he would place it under the man’s tongue and sew his mouth shut. To quell the pass of evil, he thought. He would then sew his eyelids shut for the sake of his eyes, he wouldn’t see to rob him of his soul; no he wouldn’t.

He was filled with the confident mirth of his promise, the promise to quell the surging tide of zombies, of hateful devil’s breath. He stood from the depth of the hedgerow and whispered, “Come on, come on out, Mr. Monster!”

In the distance a rare summer thunder and dry lightning filled the air with a strobe light glow, his face illuminated and pale, crazy, desiring the kill, the intense rush of madmen and shadow. He knew the power of his will and he possessed sleep, the sweet realm of sleep and quiet demise. He would give them sacred havens of sleep, the drama of heaven’s bosom.

The front door on the cottage opened and a man in a three piece suit stepped out. The front porch light shone for an instant, illuminating a stout woman in her thirties, she was handing the suit something, a briefcase. She kissed the man on the cheek and he said, “I’ll see you later, sweetheart.”

“Have a good day, honey,” she replied.

Zombies, both of them zombies. He patted the bag of rock salt in his pocket as he found the inspiration to attack.

In the end he managed nearly half the neighborhood of Suburban Keep on that Halloween night. He would live on as the darkness in their lives and until the end of their lives. The end was simple for him and complete. He had stopped in the middle of sewing a zombie's mouth shut when a cascade of darkness overwhelmed him and his eyes clouded. The will he thought, the will. He had closed his eyes and groaned as the heart of a greater will overwhelmed him.

When they found him he was assumed to have been a victim of the monster. His eyes were sewn shut as well as his mouth, a chunk of rock salt beneath his tongue. The police wondered about - but never questioned - the needle and yarn in his own hand.



## **WHY THE OLD MAN NEVER GAVE OUT CANDY**

***Ken L. Jones***

*(For Andy Griffith, whose vision of a friendly neighborly America  
we will quite probably never see the like of again)*

The days leading up to Halloween when I was a boy were long and stretched out like the salt water taffy that my friend Biggie's aged great-grandmother once made for all of us neighborhood kids in his living room. Leaves that had been too long green now faded to beautiful colors as they prepared to drop and die and they made me wish that humans did that too, instead of wrinkling up and hunching over as their teeth vanished one by one. The vast cornfields, each guarded by a one-of-a-kind comical scarecrow that would soon be unemployed when the roasting ears were plucked and brought in, showed the true promise of this harvesting season, as did the not quite symmetrical patches of pumpkins who humbly awaited their final purpose as a cut face jack-o-lantern or a delicious Thanksgiving pie.

School would start again after a long sirocco of a summer and was made bearable by the promise of October 31 and the bulletin boards soon were filled with cutouts of jitterbugging mummies and tomb-peeking ghouls who told us with a smile to do our homework or else face the consequences. Our textbook readers, usually full of more mundane stuff, soon became the place where most of us were first introduced to Washington Irving's shudder inducing Hessian without a head in The Legend of Sleepy Hollow as well as melancholy old Mister Poe and his Raven who could only croak Nevermore as old Edgar Allan did things with rhymes that had nothing to do with nurseries. The slightly bent and ever tilting spinner rack of comic books down at our corner drug store, which all summer long had featured Superman's Pal Jimmy Olsen, The Fox and The Crow and My Forbidden Romance, now every Tuesday and Thursday had comic books placed in the front of all of its slots that boasted Classics Illustrated versions of Mary Shelly's Frankenstein and Robert Louis Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. The shudder-inducing Houses of Mystery and of Secrets and for the very youngest of our brothers and sisters, both Casper and Timmy The Timid Ghosts, were also more than prominent then, too. The drugstore was not alone as the whole town slowly

focused in on that great night that was to come. The grocery store slowly filled up with green apples and huge dark glass jugs of apple cider. There were giant bags full of various and delicious kinds of candy that were just the right size to give away to an imploring pirate or an overly rouged up eight year old girl wearing her maiden aunt's flapper outfit complete with long strands of pearls and a string-less ukulele. The Goodwill secondhand store, which was usually a sad and dusty place of discards, now became a veritable Arabian nights' marketplace bazaar where all manner of real world clothing and accessories could be had for mere pennies and put to the far more noble use of converting one into either Laurel or Hardy or one of the marines who had raised the flag up on Iwo Jima, or even some kind of a moon man who was sure to be encountered by our brave astronauts such as the heroic John Glenn, the idol of all America.

Even old Jack Cooper, who was not the long time actor and foil of Wallace Beery but was indeed an ancient man who greatly resembled the actor Ed Wynn, would offer any boy brave enough to ask for it by name a genuine haircut exactly like the wig that Boris Karloff had given to him by makeup great Jack Pierce. That was when Boris took out his false teeth and donned neck bolts and asphalt spreader's boots to become the mad doctor's patchwork undead creation. Even much scorned TV, that brand new medium and whipping boy of both the PTA and pseudo intellectuals everywhere, would burst with reruns of One Step Beyond and new shows of great imagination such as Rod Sterling's' The Twilight Zone and The Outer Limits. Even aged lisping Boris Karloff's Thriller. Weekend midnights were made even more goose flesh raising as Shock Theater, which was good to watch any time of the year, got down to the real deal as it showed nothing but the classic Universal Monsters from the first day of school till all the saints were celebrated on November the first at the same time.

Now if I've made it sound as if everyone and everything in my hometown enjoyed and reveled in Halloween, then I haven't quite painted an accurate picture of it, for one man clearly did not. Maybe he once upon a time had a real name but if he did, people had long ago jettisoned the usage of it and instead had taken to calling him the Old Man and nothing else. Now calling him thusly was never meant to be a compliment, even if it was a perfect description of him, for he was quite probably the most aged person that any of us had ever met or even heard of. No one knew exactly how many rings would be revealed and counted if he had been a tree instead of a

human and you sawed him down. Some of us wondered if he somehow wasn't both at the same time, for he more than greatly resembled the old tree at our crossroads upon which our ancestors used to lynch stage coach robbers.

Nobody knew or cared much about this old man any more or even gave him much of a thought to him except at Halloween, when he was the only adult in town not to give out candy to us kids. Why, even Mister Boravich, our dentist, came across and he was the biggest anti-snacks and treats advocate that you have ever heard of. So you can well imagine what effect this singular act of stinginess on the part of the old man had on the entire child population of our town.

This strange quirk of the old man's was often the topic of great noontime lunch table speculation from school's opening day clear to after Thanksgiving yielded nothing much more than thoughts of the approaching Christmas. The theories about why he never gave any trick or treaters candy ranged from the practical (just plain couldn't afford to) to the imaginatively bizarre (since he was himself a cannibal he would give away that salient fact if he dropped real human fingers in our plastic pumpkin loot pails instead of bite-size Butterfingers).

As for me, I was somewhere in the middle of this controversy and perhaps would have never had to arrive at any final conclusion had it not been for my friend Steven "Biggie" Biggerstaff. Biggie was my best friend at the time even though or perhaps because of the fact that we were as different from each other as two children could possibly be. He was young, I was older than he. He had curly hair, I had straight. He was fat. I was as skinny as Doc Holiday; at least I was back then. He was a Catholic. I was a Jew who went to the Methodist church because there were no synagogues in our town as of yet. He loved sports. I had asthma and didn't. He was the youngest child in his family. I was the oldest in mine. He was very poor and my family was extremely upper middle class and had money to burn. That was just some of it. I suspect that it was Biggie's very poverty that made him obsess so about why the old man never gave out candy, for you see, Halloween was the only time that this overly hungry and sweet toothed big lad had all of the candy that his system could possibly process. So the very idea of someone not contributing to this once a year sugar binge of his really hit him hard and where he lived.

I should have been surprised by what happened next but I wasn't. It was early on October 30 and I was in a really great Halloween mood. I had a brand new and cool costume already to go that was an intricate copy of Disney's Zorro that my step-grandmother had made for me. Zorro was the biggest thing ever that year and Guy Williams, who played him, was both my idol and my role model. I even had a cool fake sword which I had purchased at Disneyland when we had gone there on vacation that you could put a piece of chalk in front of to duplicate the fox so cunning and free sign of the Z with. Biggie was clearly jealous of all of this. He was going as Chester A. Riley who William Bendix played in reruns of The Life of Riley on our local station and that was appropriate because he looked enough like Bendix to be him as a kid. I loved that show back then and still do. Biggie was going to wear his father's old bowling team uniform and carry the old bowling ball bag that had been made obsolete when his dad had received a new one last Christmas and that was going to be where he stashed all the candy he planned to beg for door to door. Me, I was waist deep in the season, assembling my new official Bela Lugosi Dracula model that I bought the night before at our nearby Sprouse-Reitz dime store while I listened to my beloved LP of Forry Akerman's Famous Monster's Speak! which featured two cool radio play-like stories with appropriate sound effects about Frankenstein and Dracula respectively. They were ably mimed by Gabriel Dell who once was a Bowery Boy and I liked them back then and still do which made him an idol of mine, also.

The air in my room was thick with the fumes of Testor's glue which hung on my fingers like sticky tree sap as I sat at my work bench on and by then one remaining old bar stool, happily bringing the still sticky pieces of the vampire count that I had painted only an hour ago carefully to final undeath by applying huge dabs of fragrantly dream-inducing mucilage which I was applying with much concentration and delicacy.

Biggie too sniffed it as he came in and smiled. "Smells sweeter than when my mom's lilacs are in bloom, don't it?" he said as he inhaled great gulps of it through his somewhat piggish looking nostrils.

I just nodded, yes, floating and happy and not realizing the source of my euphoria exactly. Then Biggie, who felt more comfortable than your favorite slippers with anything that belonged to me, plopped his Baby Huey-like frame down on my bottom bunk bed and started pawing through a large stack of comic books that I had piled there.

"Nothing but monster stuff here," he said, thumbing through them dismissively. "Where's your Rip Hunter Time Masters and The War That Time Forgot and the Metal Men? Now there's some good comic books."

I almost said, 'how would you know what a good funny book is? All you have in your comic book collection are the free giveaway Treasure Chest comic books that they give you each week at St. Justin's Catholic school where you attend. The rest of them are just your older sisters Teresa and Kathy's coverless Jughead comic books' but somehow I restrained myself and changed the subject.

"When I'm done with this you want to go visit Groundskeeper Daugherty out at the old graveyard? That's fun to do at Halloween or maybe we could ride around town on our bikes and look at how all the houses are decorated?"

The second one I later figured out he didn't want to do because he didn't have a nice new Schwinn like I did but was forced to tool around on a very old and very rusty girl's bike that Teresa had given up when she had started going out and about town on the back of a Harley Davison with someone who greatly resembled Arthur Fonzarelli from Happy Days in appearance if not in his behavior. So you see none of this was satisfactual to old Biggie who had arrived in my glue fume pregnant room with a plan already clearly rooted in his mind.

"Let's check out the old man," he blurted out with a really dumb expression and lopsided smile upon his face when he did so.

This had come up many, many times before and always during Halloween seasons past, but somehow I had always managed to dodge the bullet on it. I guess because of my Testor's induced mellowness, I just stupidly agreed to go along for the ride and soon we were both on our way, crunching through the drifts of crackling brown leaves that covered most of the ancient sidewalks of our town. The fresh air of early afternoon October should have brought us out of our stupor and sobered me up at least enough to realize not only the foolishness of this errand of Biggie's but indeed the true wrongness of it all but it didn't. I guess you could blame how pregnant everything already was with the extreme prankishness of Halloween night for clearly I too felt more than a little ready to get behind some mischievousness. Whatever got into us and whoever placed it there, we were clearly now our town's junior version of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, Batman and Robin or at least Abbott and Costello as we set off

gleefully to solve a mystery that would have been better off remaining unsolved.

The old man's house was a place of extreme solitude and the only way that it could be reached was by traversing a swampy ravine, if the rain hadn't swollen its belly up too much to do so. If it did, you had no choice but to cut through a long and rarely visited Civil War Battle graveyard where many still argue that angry voices and haints still contest about states' rights and whether or not Negros are property on a nightly basis. I've never heard anything but crows cawing lazily there while grasshoppers used their back legs like violins in the tall grass of that sad untended place. But then maybe I just wasn't listening as hard as some folks do. Anyway, what did any of that have to do with what Biggie and I were attempting to accomplish on this day that I won't soon forget?

Now you must keep in mind that the old man's ancestral home really didn't look like much until you were right on top of it. That had everything, I'm guessing, to do with how obscured it was by trees and shrubbery and vines that crept everywhere. From far away you might be tempted to think that it was long abandoned, but nothing could have possibly been further from the truth. I have to confess that upon first sighting it that day, especially in the context of the fact that it was the day before Halloween, made me want to turn and run for my very life. I already knew that my regular route on All Hallows' Evening would yield me a tooth rotting bounty of candy and treats, not to mention that I regularly got more than I should have really been wolfing down, thanks to my kindly and over indulgent parents so who needed the old man's? But such was not the case with Biggie and since somehow in his mind he pinned most of the blame for that on the old man, Biggie was obsessed with the idea of finding out exactly what kind of screw loose that ancient so and so had about not giving out the swag when asked to do so ever so politely by a trick or treater who was following the correct etiquette of it all.

As I was saying, all of this seemed rather abstract to me but then when you have a pal like Biggie who has set his mind on doing something as much as he had in doing this, you either helped him out or else he wouldn't be much of a pal to you after that if you didn't. Still, the most I could offer him was that I would be his lookout, hanging back in case the old man or some other objecting adult might take umbrage at him snooping around like this and this I accomplished by crouching down behind a squat red brick

pillar that contained the old man's mailbox. Doing my best imitation of Michael Ansara as Cochise in the Broken Arrow TV show I got down on my haunches and agreed that I would imitate an old hootie owl as the signal that anything had gone awry.

Thus prepared, Biggie set off to solve what to him seemed to be his life's most pressing and vexing mystery. I have to admit that at that moment I hoped that he would succeed for no better reason than that I was hoping that might mean the ceasing of all this nonsense. What happened next didn't solve any mysteries; it only added new layers and wrinkles to the one that had hung over our town for so long. Biggies' inquiry started out traditionally enough with him casing the building the way that Peter Gunn or Kookie and the detectives from 77 Sunset Strip did on TV. While he was doing this I noticed that his hand-me-down Eisenhower jacket, which had once belonged to his now deceased grandfather, caught hard on a part of the building's façade which had eroded away and it tore the living heck out of his one and only jacket as it did so. Peeved by this he reflexively lashed out at the source of this and in so doing tore off what seemed to be something like aluminum siding that sort of looked like bricks on the surface. I have to admit that I was surprised by what lay beneath all this, for it was not any kind of building material that I had ever heard of but instead was candy bar after candy bar of all different kinds. I have to admit that the idea that the old man lived in a house of candy seemed overly strange to me but what happened next more than dwarfed it in its very oddness as the candy starved Biggie fell on the exposed wall and began gobbling its innards as fast as he could.

Then the old man, alerted by all this racket, came out of his house through his front door and bent over the porch's railing to snatch that unfortunate boy right up with a strength that a geezer his age could not possibly possess. Never have I seen such anger on a human's face before nor seen eyes like that that did not belong to some teased circus animal.

"What rat gnaws at my house?" he snarled into the clearly terrified Biggie's sweating and pop-eyed face.

When Biggie didn't answer him, the old man took his captive deep into the depths of his house, slamming the door behind him so hard that it startled the bats out in a flurry from the high tower there. Even though all of this petrified me, I found that my curiosity was now so badly aroused that I couldn't stop myself from creeping closer to see what I might learn about

my best friend's fate. Finding an obscure window I almost gasped out loud at what I beheld in the living room. Everywhere in sight were sweets and candies and even life-size gingerbread boys and girls. Even more incongruous than that was what looked like Halloween costumes with some kind of fake skin and heads tucked into them that hung on hangers hither and yon. They were of every theme and kind that you can imagine. Many of them appeared to be quite old as if they dated back to the very beginnings of such carryings on and in the center of it all was Biggie, shackled in candy necklaces and gagged with a nutty slab of Abazaba Taffy and trussed up in an old chair that appeared to be made of candy canes with large licorice whips for added restraints. Much as I wanted to run screaming I wanted even more to understand it all fully, if that was even possible, so to better try to do that I pressed my then keen and sharp ears closer to the candy walls of this impossible place as if to hear better what the old man's brusque and half growled monologue was all about.

"Oh, Steven Biggerstaff, once my sister and I were hungry, gnawing little rats such as you. Hungrier! You have no idea, you people of this country, of the kind of hunger and poverty that Gretel and I and my family suffered. Momma and Papa could not feed us so Papa resolved to lose us in the woods, hoping to end our burden. We cleverly left a bread trail home. Oh I see you've heard of Hansel and Gretel. I guess everyone has thanks to those Brothers Grimm. Since they thought that they were relating hogwash that some drunken Bavarian bumpkin had told them, they decided they could play fast and loose with exactly what happened. They got some of it right but a lot of it got garbled. There was a gingerbread house, really a house of candy actually, there was a witch. We killed her, besides that everything was different. We didn't live happily ever after. We were cursed to both immortality and to take her place. A lot of it was because of how ungodly we were. Somehow over the centuries Gretel came to seek forgiveness and was allowed to age and die and go to Heaven but not me. Hitler and his bunch drove me out of my original stronghold and I somehow found passage to America. Since it was the true candy land, I settled in its southern parts here and built my house of candy. This I did by stealing children's treats. Every Halloween I put on one of these costumes and the false skin that goes with it that the old witch's spell book taught me how to weave on her magic loom and then off I went about my great task. Chances are that if you or someone you know has ever had your trick or treat candy

taken away from you by an older boy, it was me in one of my many disguises. I have to do it, you see a house such as mine needs constant repairs due to the erosion of the elements and the harsh effects of inclement weather upon it. That's why I never give out candy on Halloween; I have too desperate a need of it to even give one candy bar away."

While the old lunatic had raved on and on, too caught up on reliving the past, he did not properly take notice of what the ever hungry Biggie had been doing. That much too oversized man-child had eaten his way out of all that confined him and only a large rude belch when he finished finally gave him away. Biggie then rose quickly to his feet and started lunging menacingly towards his captor. Sometime during the scuffle Biggie picked up a antique looking gun that looked as if it would have been at home in the hands of the Scarlet Pimpernel. He stood his ground with it for a time as the old man advanced on him menacingly, cursing and fuming in what sounded like German. Then Biggie, with trembling fingers, finally released its singular musket ball straight into the old man's heart and what happened next defies the retelling of it as the old man seemed bones and all to go up like he was a whole box full of Alka-Seltzer's going plop, plop, fizz, fizz all at the same time.

This was the final straw for me and what happened next reminded me of what it must be like to be Barry Allen aka The Flash from one of my favorite funny books. Like him, in a blur I was out of the outer part of town and then standing breathless and red-faced in front of old Jack Cooper's Barbershop in what seemed like an instant. Old Coop, who was like an uncle to me, graciously brought me in and seated me in one of his comfortable barber's chairs and gave me a cold bottle of Hires root beer, then called Sheriff Taylor up and told him to get down to his place immediately. Andy was his usual affable self but still I wasn't comfortable in relating all that I had seen to him truthfully so I merely told him that Biggie and I had went frog gigging out in the old ravine and that some kind of hobo or swamp rat had jumped us and waylaid my pal. A search was made by both Andy and his ever nervous deputy Fife. They were helped by the good old boy in the Jughead hat who runs our local gas station and acts as an impromptu law enforcement aid sometimes. Despite the fact that I think they tried real hard out there, they came up with very little useful information. Strangely enough, as near as I could tell, they never even went anywhere's near the old man's house or even thought to question whoever

was or wasn't in its shadowy depths even though it lay smack dab in the middle of the grid that they were combing through and that fact alone spoke volumes to me about what was wrong out there.

Now some other youn-gun's might have skipped Halloween altogether after this but not me. I was in the fourth grade and folks in my town gave up all that costumed tomfoolery after the sixth grade so on when my Zorro duds and off I went about my tried and true candy route, Biggie or no Biggie. If I had quit two houses sooner than I did all would have been well but since I didn't, I got Pearl Harbored by some big kid dressed up in a Ben Cooper Howdy Doody plastic outfit and a goofily grinning mask held in place by an unsubstantial elastic band. The son-of-a-gun got away with every last Snicker's Bar and Cup of Gold and whatever else I had scored that night. Upset by this, which was the first and only time it had ever happened to me, I soon calmed down and took it all at face value and suspected that it might have been the local touched in the head boy we called Chicken Foot's Doings.

As the weeks stretched on and Biggie never was seen again I came to realize why the eyes behind the Howdy Doody mask looked so danged familiar and why folks from then on swore that someone other than the old man now refused to give out candy every Halloween, even if they didn't exactly know or seem to care why whoever it now was seemed so gosh darned kind of familiar to them, in spite of all that.



## OL' HOLLOW HEAD

*Brian Barnett*

Nick shielded his little sister from the ugly red slash of color on the front door of their house. He didn't know why, she'd see it eventually. He supposed he wanted Jenny to enjoy her first Halloween on Blackwood Lane. He hoped it was a one-time welcome-to-the-neighborhood Halloween prank. If not, life for the foreseeable future was going to be rough.

It was hard enough having to move in with Grandma. Dad had been laid off and they needed a place to stay. He'd acted real nervous about moving there, but eventually ran out of money and had to.

Being twelve, Dad thought he was mature enough to take Jenny trick or treating. Nick agreed.

He handed Jenny her plastic bag. The sun had dipped below the tree line in the distance, allowing the glow-in-the-dark skeleton on it to glow green.

"Slow down!" scolded Nick.

Jenny skipped along the uneven sidewalk that ran parallel with Blackwood Lane. The neighboring house already had a short line of tiny pirates and ghouls begging for a candy bowl.

Nick waited at the end of the cobblestone walkway that led to the house. At twelve he was much too old to dress up and Trick or Treat – especially in a new town. Besides, he knew he could steal Jenny's candy later in the night anyway.

Jenny skipped back to Nick's side. Her curls bobbed with each step. Her pink tutu and fairy wings were too stiff to move.

The street grew progressively darker. Some of the streetlamps were not working leaving long, murky shadows that all but blacked out the end of the cul-de-sac.

Nick thought he saw someone tall moving in the darkness. Somebody just on the edge of the shadows, far enough where the light did not touch, but where it was still light enough to see detail. It appeared as if someone was wearing a large pumpkin mask.

A little boy dressed as a superhero crashed into Nick. Both tumbled to the sidewalk.

“Sorry!” a tiny voice said as the masked hero jumped up and ran along as if it had never happened.

Nick swiped away the crumbled bits of dried leaves from his pants leg and climbed back to his feet. He glanced back to where he saw the figure in the oversized pumpkin mask. The person was gone.

“Come on, Nick!”

Jenny’s arms were crossed and her face was scrunched up angrily.

Nick checked the shadows again but saw nothing.

“Why don’t we try crossing the street?” He led Jenny away from the darkened dead end, constantly scanning the shadows for the dark figure.

When they reached the other side, Jenny skipped up to the house. Nick waited, not wanting to turn his back toward the gloomy cul-de-sac.

“You have the mark on your door.”

The sudden statement nearly stopped Nick’s heart. He spun to see a group of three teenagers. All were several years older than he was. The one in front stared expectantly.

“Huh?”

“The mark. You know, that big red mark on your front door. That’s not good.”

Nick edged backwards. Was the figure in the mask a fourth member of this teenage group? Would he come up and grab him from behind?

“Look, I don’t want any trouble. We’re new here and my sister just wants to have a normal Halloween.”

“Too late for that. You’ll have trouble. That mark means Ol’ Hollow Head is coming for you. What did you do?”

Nick balled his hands into fists. It was obvious they were determined to scare him. He could see it in their eyes. There was an edge to them.

“Guys, I’m responsible for my sister, okay? I just want to get this night over with and go home.”

Jenny was examining her haul. Two mini chocolate bars and a sucker. She dropped them into her bag and sighed at the sight of the teenagers.

“Come on, Nick! I’m going to miss out on the good stuff if we keep standing around.”

She pushed her way through the teenagers and Nick tried to follow. They blocked him.

“He’s coming to see you tonight. I hope you’re ready to disappear forever. You must’ve done something awful.”

Nick lowered his shoulder and shoved his way through. He followed Jenny up to the next house, not wanting her to be alone. He turned back toward the teenagers. They were all staring back, but something about their expressions was odd. Did they look concerned?

“Thank you!”

Jenny grabbed Nick’s hand and dragged him from the stoop toward the next house. Nick glanced at the teenagers again, but they were gone.

The next house was not decorated, save for a plastic pumpkin filled with candy on the porch. An old man sat, gently rocking in his chair and stared curiously at Nick and Jenny.

“You two came from the marked house.”

Nick sighed. “Yeah, somebody threw paint on our door.”

“Not somebody. *Him*. ”

“Him who? Do you know his name? I need to tell my parents. They’ll want to know.”

“What happened, Nick?” asked Jenny. “Somebody painted our door?”

“It’s no big deal, Jenny. Get your candy.”

“It is a big deal, son. A very big deal. He’s going to come see you soon.”

“*Who* is?” Nick demanded.

“Ol’ Hollow Head.”

“Come on. Not you too.”

“Listen, son. You need to know about Ol’ Hollow Head.” The old man stopped rocking and leaned close. His breath smelled like coffee. “He was a boy who lived on this very street. This was before trick or treating was popular in these parts. Kids would go to school dances or play pranks on the old folks, but going door to door for candy just wasn’t done then.

“Well, he was walking home from a friend’s house when a high school kid named Jimmy Gray and his friends drove past. They snatched him up and took him to Tillett Hollow.

“They emptied out a big pumpkin and put it over his head and stranded him there. It was a harmless prank, sure, but nobody ever heard from him again.

“On the next Halloween, the first door was marked with red paint. It belonged to Mark Harper, one of Jimmy’s friends. By the end of the night, Mark was gone. The following years it was the same, finally ending with Jimmy.

“People started burning herbs on their porches and spreading salt around for years after that. But not since Jimmy disappeared has the red mark come back.”

“I’m scared!” Jenny said, clutching her candy bag close.

“Don’t be, Jenny. These people are nuts. We just moved here. Obviously we haven’t done anything. It’s just a stupid prank. I would’ve figured an old guy like you wouldn’t pick on little girls.”

A look of hurt flashed on the old man’s face. He relaxed back into his chair and slowly shook his head. “Be vigilant, young man. He will come tonight. That I can guarantee.”

“Come on, Jenny. Let’s go home.”

“Is the Hollow Head coming for me?”

“No, Jenny. These sick people are trying to scare you. Don’t pay any attention.”

They entered the house and saw Grandma and Dad in the kitchen, huddled over a pan of fresh cookies. She playfully slapped his hand away.

“Those need to cool. You’ll burn yourself.”

“Dad, the people in this neighborhood are nuts.” Nick said.

“How do you mean?”

“Well somebody splashed paint on the door and-”

Grandma slapped both hands over her mouth.

Dad looked panicky.

“Dad, what’s going on?”

“It’s a long story. We need to get you two out of here.”

“Does the story have something to do with a boy with a pumpkin over his head?”

Dad looked as if he’d been slapped across the face.

“How did you know?”

“An old man across the street said something about it. Were you one of Jimmy Gray’s friends?”

Dad slumped against the counter.

“Friend is a strong word. I’d only met him that night. I wanted a ride home from the school dance. He was a senior and I was a sophomore, so I thought it’d be cool if I rode home with him. Well, I guess you know what happened that night. I cried about it so many nights afterward.

“When the other guys started disappearing, Mom sent me to live with Aunt Maureen. Of course I thought it may have been a vengeful family

member kidnapping Jimmy and his friends. So I thought it was safe to move back.

“Obviously I was wrong.”

Grandma ran to the pegboard on by the door. She snatched her car keys and tossed them to Dad. “You all get out of here. You need to go before he comes!”

A shadow glided across the living room window. It was thin with a large head. The octagon-shaped window on the door darkened and the doorknob rattled.

Grandma twisted the bolt lock on the door, sobbing loudly.

“He’s here!” said Nick.

Jenny started crying.

“Follow your Grandma. Go upstairs and hide.” Dad said.

He hugged Nick and Jenny and ran out the back door. The rattling doorknob silenced and the shadow beyond the octagon window vanished.

Nick and Jenny stood, frozen in place for what seemed to be an eternity. They listened for the distinctive roar of their Grandma’s ancient car.

It never came.

Days went by. The door was cleaned. Nick and Jenny finally went back to school. There they often overheard whispers about their Dad. He was the newest chapter in the legend of Ol’ Hollow Head.



## HALLOWEEN IN THE GRAVEYARD

*Olivia Arieti*

Sean was sure it was going to be a creepy evening for nothing could be scarier than spending the night of Halloween in the village graveyard, looking out for ghosts.

“A truly whacky idea,” he thought, disapproving Pete’s decision. As a matter of fact, his brother, tired of the usual local parties, was determined to find some real excitement. Playing tricks on the demoniac creatures was part of his plan as well.

“Vampires, too, would be most welcome,” Pete added, sneering at the boy’s manifest fear.

Sean decided to wear his turtle neck jumper and keep his coat all buttoned up just in case any of those evil monsters showed up.

Horrid shrieks and hoots resounded all around and shadows of bats and owls hovered above the boys as they entered the solitary cemetery. The cold wind sweeping through the almost barren boughs and the black clouds in the sky made the atmosphere most frightening. A bad storm was certainly coming. Sean was sure that witches too would find trouble on their way. He felt quite uncomfortable but preferred to hide his feelings. His brother would have considered him a chicken and made fun of him.

“Well, here we are. Hope you’re ready to face all the ghosts and goblins who dare to show up!” said Pete, laughing scornfully.

Sean didn’t find him funny at all. He couldn’t help thinking of the stories their grandma used to tell about spooks unable to rest peacefully. On that particular night they would come out of their tombs to settle their unresolved problems. The place was definitely too haunted for him.

Footsteps made both boys turn abruptly. Surprise and relief could be seen on their faces as they saw two girls approaching. They were very pretty but Sean was distrustful, fearing they might be witches in disguise.

“Come on now,” chuckled Pete. “Ever seen such gorgeous witches?”

The girls appeared quite surprised to see them and Sue, apparently the eldest, explained that they were waiting for their friend, Wendy. This was their meeting place on the night of Halloween.

“You’re pretty brave,” remarked Pete. “the girls I know never would have ventured up here tonight.”

Sue and her sister, Jane, looked uneasy though and Pete couldn't discern if it was the fear of being in that scary place, despite their apparent boldness, or the disappointment of finding others there.

Pete invited them to join in the fun. Jane remarked dryly, "I believe ghosts would rather roam around in peace."

"They're vampires, perhaps," whispered Sean.

"Can't deny they're as lovely as Count Dracula's brides," replied Pete, loudly.

A strange look ran through the girls' eyes, followed by sinister laughter that made Sean shiver and his brother question his intentions.

Strong gusts of wind caused the trees to sway their long branches towards them like lugubrious zombie arms. Thunder echoed in the distance and purple shadows like huge witches' gowns stretched across the skyline. Certainly the moon didn't dare to show up on such a dreary night. Now in complete darkness, the little cemetery looked even creepier. Sean ardently wished he hadn't come.

The boy shuddered once again when a girl wearing a witch costume appeared.

"I knew they would arrive," he cried.

"No, it's our friend, Wendy," Jane assured him.

The girls hugged her.

"We were afraid you wouldn't make it," said Sue. "It's such an awful night."

Wendy replied that nothing would have stopped her; there was no frightful demon or dreadful weather that would have kept her from meeting her dearest friends.

Pete suggested sitting under one of the oak trees and waiting patiently for the spooks to appear. It was almost midnight and they surely wouldn't be much longer. In the meantime they could tell some ghost stories, just to *liven* up the atmosphere.

"Go ahead, Sue," exhorted Wendy. "Let's hear the one about the boat ride on a late Halloween afternoon."

"Sounds spooky enough to me," remarked Pete. "Don't you think so, Sean?"

The boy nodded helplessly and Sue started telling them about a few girls and their teacher who went for a ride on a nearby lake.

"Bet the boat was haunted," laughed Pete.

“Hush!” Jane said harshly.

The boat wasn’t haunted, the narrator explained, but unfortunately, a sudden storm caused the little vessel to capsize and not all the girls made it. The teacher died too. Their ghosts were said to haunt the village and its surroundings for their coffins are still empty. Their bodies had never been found.

Sean didn’t enjoy the story at all, but his brother appeared amused.

Thunder made everyone jump and raindrops began to fall. It was exactly midnight when a macabre figure appeared out of the dark. She was wrapped in a black cloak which left visible only her cadaverous face and zombie-like arm as she beckoned them towards her.

In an irritated tone, the lugubrious shape shouted, “Girls, can’t you see it’s raining? Do you want to get soaked once again?”

“Oh no, Miss Warren!” cried Jane and Sue in ghostly voices.

As they sprang to their feet, their lovely features gained a ghastly rigidness and turned extremely pale and emaciated. They would have seemed like spectral wax statues if it hadn’t been for their hurried movements.

Wendy raised her hand to bid them farewell and shouted as they rushed away, “See you next year, girls, same time, same place!”

In an instant, the little party disappeared as if swallowed by the pitch darkness of the night.

“Where did they go?” asked Sean, startled and scared.

“Come, I’ll show you,” said Wendy.

The wind was blowing wild now and the shrieks were very loud, sharp edgy sounds that cut the ears. Strange shadows seemed to follow them along the wet grassy path covered with nettles and suffocated moans could be heard all around.

Pete began feeling uneasy and Sean was scared to death.

Wendy stopped in front of a huge tombstone. On it were Jane and Sue’s pictures and another showed their teacher, Miss Warren. The words, “Waiting with Love” were the only inscription.

A flash of lightning followed by another crack of thunder seemed to split the sky in two as a furious whirlwind of dry leaves rose from the ground. The moans turned into frightful cries and the lugubrious shadows were all around, swirling in a macabre dance as if suddenly released from their underground dwellings. Invisible to human eyes, all the paranormal

creatures of the night seemed to have gathered in that little graveyard. The incessant rain that began to fall made Wendy and the boys rush home, leaving behind the macabre site with its creepy inhabitants.

Next morning, due to the intensity of the storm, three corpses were uncovered on the bank of the lake: two belonged to the unfortunate girls and one to their teacher.

The brothers' story of their Halloween encounters remained unbelievable but Wendy was aware she would never meet her dear friends again.

At last Jane, Sue and Miss Warren were peacefully sleeping in their graves.



## THE GHOST TRAIN

*Matthew Wilson*

"Car twelve, please." Jason said at the old amusement park ride.

For a while, the ticket man waited for the punch line.

He *wasn't* joking. A relic of bad times, the dusty old car had stood vacant at the front of the ghost train before Jason was born.

He'd heard how Billy Tanner had gotten on the ride with his girl back in Halloween '74. Only he got off. No one believed she had vanished before his eyes, they'd been arguing and she'd been looking to leave.

Folks called him murderer.

Till Adam Conns had a heart attack half way through the ride in Halloween '83.

The ride was sub-standard; the highlight of it was a poorly paid employee in a gorilla suit jumping out at the end. Conns was stiff by the time he reached him. Jason doubted even someone with a bum heart could be frightened to death by cardboard skeletons.

No police action was taken, for it was just one of those things; like Jason's sister dying in the summer heat of the London marathon. Interest in the ghost train trebled. Profits were high.

But no one rode car 12.

The usual poor quality of the scares inside soon drained enthusiasm and people stopped whispering Billy Tanner's date had been spirited away through some worm hole.

Just one of those things.

Jason figured the owner must have sung from the cliff tops when the man and woman died in Halloween '08.

The ghost train was nearly dead on its feet. Its reputation dwindled and business was near non-existent. In a digital world, a child had computers to give them chills.

Ghost trains were for babies.

Until the murders.

After the renewed interest of Halloween '83, the owner had invested in cameras inside the building. He hoped to catch some alien abduction, or reason for the many unexplained actions.

Ghost don't like being spied on and, with nothing to report, by spring '08, the cameras were long sold.

No one saw how the man and woman died. For sentiment's sake, they boarded the train before it closed for bankruptcy. The two had been young and in love when they shared popcorn there on a first date and fancied one more scare.

The kids in the nearby arcade, killing zombies, had heard the crowd scream and gathered round.

After the police investigation found no blame on the owner's part, interest peaked for a new generation.

Darers came to take a ride.

But no one chose car 12.

Not until Jason.

"No." The man behind the bullet proof glass said and continued reading his comic.

Jason felt his legs buckle, but held onto the counter before he fell completely and looked a fool.

His sister was dead and he refused to fear it. He'd seen her clutch her head and fall down dead; holding her till the ambulance came. He was only 16, but had to grow up quickly.

The psychiatrist insisted he face his fears. But in a town of 800 souls, there was little to raise his blood pressure.

Just the ghost train.

Until last year, Eric Noon had mercilessly tormented Jason, burning his books and tearing his jacket for the hell of it. He was the son of a bully and dealt with his pain by dishing it out on others.

Those weaker than him.

Recently, this had included Jason. But since that awful incident, Eric had stayed away from him. Jason had demanded a confrontation. Stab him with a compass in science class, throw him out the second floor window like Eric dared.

Jason didn't care.

With his new creepy persona, Jason became a pariah at school. As more people turned their back on him, his chance for a decent scare dwindled.

Till he heard of car 12.

"What do ya mean, no!" Jason demanded and, as if it were a great effort, the man behind the counter in a red hat celebrating some rock event of the dead 80's, lay down the comic and rubbed his migraine.

"It's too much trouble, kid. Last thing I need is another body to clean up."

Jason scoffed, not fearing death. By the decay of the building, it was obvious that a body was exactly what this place needed. A little interest to bring the money in. But Jason knew there would be no corpse. Just a release of this awful anxiety.

"Come on, this dump can't have long left to run -- if anything happens to me, you must consider it a God-send."

The ticket man hated thrill seekers. Why didn't the little fool bungee-jump off a cliff and be done with it? Was it too much to ask to find peace at work? He'd just found an old comic in the bin and got to the good part.

Jason stood firm and the ticket man could see the deviant wasn't going to change his mind. People were already looking and he wouldn't be made a bad guy. Lots of punks had video phones these days.

He wouldn't be made out a chicken on YouTube.

He took the bet.

"You wanna play with the ghouls, be my guest."

"The scariest thing in this dumps is *the prices*," Jason observed and the ticket man seethed as he opened his little cubicle. He hated manual labour and had become as much a part of the booth as the cardboard ghouls in the horror house.

The fact he was moving came as some surprise to arcade fans who'd only seen the top half of him for years. Did he even have legs?

Every movement stubborn, the ticket man kicked the old cart and righted it on the track. He checked the power and inserted the key.

"In you go; hero." he said and kids were already taking bets on whether he'd see star light.

Jason complied. "You'll see me again." He smiled, then as the car was re-connected to an electric charge and shot forward, he felt a painful click in his neck.

Whiplash.

"Easy, damn it," he moaned, swatting away the cotton candy coloured spider webs covering the door. He heard the other kids give a final cheer and, as the door swung shut, everything went dark.

The screams started straight away, then acquired a tremor and stutter as the old recording spat and sparked. Jason was amazed that with the out of date wiring, the place hadn't burned down long ago.

For a moment, in the flashes of fake lightning, he thought the roof had come down and struck his head. When he heard the squeak, he realised foam bats had been suspended from wires.

Jesus, had the splatter punk generation happened at all?

Squinting, Jason saw the place was standard horror fare with faded flames painted on the walls. The fuzzy flare of a train's forward light seemed to rush at him till he saw the artist's thumb print smudged in the paint. It ruined the atmosphere somewhat.

Bored, Jason inspected the rusty safety bar. Of course there was no blood. Anything amazing in this place would be too much to ask.

*The things you must have seen*, Jason marvelled at this silent witness. The only thing that knew the answers. If Tony Wicker had stabbed his wife and slit her throat in Halloween '08, or if it had been the other way.

Thank God the ride was nearly over. Then he'd have the street credit of riding car 12, maybe kids would hang out with him again.

Jason flinched when the gorilla screamed in his face.

He'd forgotten about that-

His chest tightened as he realised the gorilla wasn't meant to leap out till the end and old Mr Kendall had died years ago anyway.

"Who the hell are you?" Jason demanded, amazed the ticket master retained enough money to *still* employ staff.

The gorilla had a knife in his hand and, with the other removed his used second hand mask. "I warned you not to take this car." The ticket master had to yell to be heard over the creepy music blared in through the radio.

"What are you doing!" Jason screamed. The rapid thump of his heart hurt his ears. The knife was so close, so big.

"I have to keep up this tradition, lad," the ticket master said. "I'd look an idiot if you came out the other end alive... we gotta keep up tradition, you know."

Jason raised his leg to kick the maniac between the legs, his mind was spinning and he forgot the bar. He heard a clang as his shin cracked against it. He screamed once, before the knife came down.

*Exit*, the bloodied sign said.

*Nearly made it,* Jason thought, tired.

Then when the knife came down again, he fell into a deeper sleep than he had ever known.

The ticket man jumped off; sure he had time to get back into his little booth before the car fully came back into the night. He hoped the devils outside still had their camera phones.

He could use some of the images for his alibi.

## PETER, PETER, TRICK OR TREATER EATER

*Bruce Markuson*

Candy, candy everywhere  
Where it's from you do not care  
On the sidewalk, on the street  
Still wrapped up, still good to eat  
Be forewarned, what's happened here  
Trick or treaters disappear.

Good boys and girls will stay away  
But troublemakers come to play  
I've heard them scream, I've heard them holler  
Then I've seen their candy shower  
I told them all to stay away  
For Halloween is Peter's day.

When I speak it's not just rhetoric  
What I tell you is prophetic  
Am I crazy, think my head's been bumped in?  
"You can't be eaten by a pumpkin?"  
Heed my warning. They say that's pathetic  
"A jack-o-lantern who's diabetic?"

Don't believe me, it's just as well  
Still legend says he roots from hell  
I used to seek him on his vine  
Until I read the warning sign

Peter, Peter Trick or Treater eater  
Saw the blood sugar rise on his meter  
Ate trick or treaters as they fell  
Then spit out their candy to keep himself well.



## THE LAST MASK

*Vince Liberato*

Dressed in the traditional black robes given to them by their parents, the Unmasked walked side by side with the other trick-or-treaters on a cold Halloween night. Thirteen Unmasked left their homes that night, all thirteen years old, the only residents of the small town for miles that were not hiding their faces. They went door to door, not looking for candy, but trying to find what had been taken from them before they were caught by the Mascareri.

The masks they searched for, masks that everyone in the town owned, were created by the Mascareri, made from the stretched and dried skin from others he had caught on past HALLOWEENS. These disguises could not be bought, could not be traded for and were the most prized possession of their owners. They would appear on doorsteps the day a baby was born, able to fit the infant head perfectly and would grow and stretch with its owner throughout their lives. These masks also brought luck, safety and prevented sickness. But on HALLOWEEN, those at the end of childhood would awaken to see if they had been picked as Unmasked. They did not know how or why they were selected, only that they had one chance to recover their mask that night. They went to school, taught by teachers who, like everyone else, kept their faces hidden that day behind their gift from the Mascareri. At lunch, all thirteen sat at the same table, one set aside for them and covered with their favorite foods, while the other students ate the cafeteria's HALLOWEEN themed meal in complete silence, careful not to spill anything when passing the food underneath the opening at the neck. When the final bell rang, they went home, dressed in clothing laid out on their beds and took to the streets.

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The clock on her wall struck nine. Only one Unmasked remained. Six had found the correct house and had gone home to eat their candy. The woman knew that for those lucky children, nothing before or after would taste as sweet to them as the spoils of this HALLOWEEN. The other six were not as lucky. The Mascareri always gave them just enough time to scream when they unknowingly arrived at the house that neighbored hers, the one where he hid and waited.

She knew firsthand what the winning six were feeling at the moment. Thirty years ago she had been one of the Unmasked. Of her group, only three had chosen the correct house while the other ten never made it home that night. The fear she remembered the most from that night was not what would happen if she met the Mascareri, but from walking next to everyone else who had their mask. That night, she knew what it was like to be completely alone. All the children and adults going house to house for candy all had their masks, while she was exposed for everyone else to see, possibly for the last time.

The last child walked to the spot in the cul-de-sac where he would make his decision. The boy had had three houses to choose from. The first one, her home, had several plywood decorations stuck in the lawn. There were a few goofy looking witches and vampires haphazardly stuck on the property lines. They grinned their cartoony fangs and witches with green skin winked and smirked at passersby. The second house was up on a small covered platform common for many houses in the area, complete with worn felt covers on the wooden steps leading up to the door. It was decked with cotton cobwebs and jack-o-lanterns, with a faceless, man-sized scarecrow sitting still in a rocking chair by the door with a large bowl on top of a table. The third had nothing special in the lawn or on the house itself, just a single light above a door that appeared as an island in a sea of trimmed hedges and wet grass that glowed blue in the twilight. Beneath the flickering bulb sat a cardboard box. Scrawled in magic marker in crimson ink, it read: *noT HerE pLeASe Take as Many AS you liKe*.

The lawn ornaments cast long shadows that mingled with the boy's own when he made his way down the path to the porch, heralding his arrival and first choice of houses to visit.

He knocked on her door.

Her vision blurred and she pinched the tears that had formed behind her mask. He was one of her students who had been too sick with worry to eat lunch that day. Several times he asked to be excused to go to the bathroom, never able to fully wipe away the puffiness around his eyes. The mask she wore, which was a shriveled, tanned mockery of the classical mask of comedy, would be instantly recognizable to him as well.

"Trick-or-treat and Happy Halloween, Miss..." he started, but then stopped himself before finishing. He, like all Unmasked, could not call anyone by their name in that state.

“Please take as many as you like,” her voice quivered as she spoke. She shook the bowl and let her eyes wander to the second house, the one with the scarecrow. He took a handful of candy, careful not to turn his head too far. It looked like he understood what she meant and he nodded in reply. He thanked her and she locked the door behind him. From the window, she watched him, hoping he would make the right choice. Her daughter, classmate to the boy, was old enough to be Unmasked slept peacefully upstairs.

For a minute that lasted hours she observed as the boy’s head rotated from house to house while he considered his options. Finally, he gathered up his confidence and made his way to the platformed building that had the scarecrow. The straw man sitting in the rocking chair was not a person in a poorly made costume, but a fake, a dummy dressed in human clothes and stuffed with newspapers to give the illusion of a too-obvious prank, one that the observing woman would have believed herself had she not known better.

She shut the blinds. The next morning, she would have to strike off the names from her roster of the students who would never show again, then take down the sign from the last house, the one that gave the only hint the Unmasked were allowed.

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The Unmasked child approached the seated figure and looked to see what it had inside the bowl. There was no candy, but an object about the size of a basketball, with leathery skin and a smile that looked as if it was connecting the eyeholes. He squealed with joy when he saw it and thrust his hands into the bowl to claim his prize.

He tugged and jerked at the face without success. Then the eyes, yellowed and bloodshot, opened and locked with his. He tried to pull his hands out of the bowl but before he could, the smile parted, revealing several rows of pointed teeth and its jaws found purchase in one of his hands, trapping him.

Then he started screaming. He pulled back, but the Mascareri would not relinquish his prey. The Unmasked boy called for help a final time and then the area in front of the table opened like a trap door, sucking him down to the depths to the Mascareri’s workshop.



## DAMNATION HOUSE

*J.J. Smith*

The phase “Exorcisms Tonight” sent a giddy feeling of excitement surging through 17-year-old Sebastian Godmear as he read the sign in front of The Holy Blood Church. The sign said:

*DAMNATION HOUSE  
Oct. 25-31, Tours start at 6:00 p.m.  
It Will Scare The Hell Out Of You  
Adults \$10, Teens \$7, Group Rates Available  
No One Under 13 Admitted  
Exorcisms Tonight By Guest Reverend Todd Lawson*

The text brought a smirk to Sebastian’s face as he thought, “We’ll see about that.”

It was Halloween night and, as Sebastian crossed the church parking lot with his friends Dave, Jimmy and Rick, he recalled how much he had anticipated this evening since he first read a Damnation House flyer a few weeks before. It had a picture of a Biblical demon looking down on a presumably unsuspecting town and under the town was copy that read: “Damnation House will shock you! Damnation House will terrify you! Damnation House will scare the Hell right out of you! If you make it through all the rooms, you’ll see how Satan convinces the naïve and ignorant to commit the sin of homosexuality, putting their lives and souls in danger. You’ll see youth attacked and made to despair through demon inspired rock music. You’ll see the Devil laugh in glee at the abortion murder of a baby. You’ll see sick ‘goths’ duped into Satanism and witness their deadly rites. But you’ll also see Christians FIGHT BACK, as Guest Reverend Todd Lawson exorcises demons out of possessed souls using no more than prayer and faith. Reverend Lawson’s appearance is a production of Jesus, Inc.” The rest of the flyer listed when and where.

Sebastian and his friends were semi-Goth rockers who loved big-breasted women, loud music, horror movies (especially hard-core splatter), beer, marijuana and Halloween, so nothing could keep them away from Damnation House. “The only thing that would make it perfect is if it

delivers real, honest to God possessed people," Sebastian said while showing the flyer to his friends over beers. "If they're really possessed people and not some assholes who blame all their problems on Satan, that would be so fuck'n cool that I might convert," he said, laughing.

"But you know it's a bunch of bullshit," Dave said. "They're either people who pretend to be possessed—you know, putting on a show—or they're nutbags; either way it's bullshit."

"Yeah, but I want to find out if they can tell the difference between someone who's faking and someone who's crazy," said Sebastian, shaking his head with a sly grin. That elicited loud laughter from his friends.

Apparently others also wanted to find out too, because a line of both the curious and faithful stretched around the two vinyl tents erected especially for Damnation House. The queue was so long it took the boys a few minutes to reach the end. To Sebastian's surprise, though, the line moved quickly and in about 30 minutes, the friends were clustered among 15 adults and youths who entered the attraction as a group.

"A tent for Christ's sake, for \$7 bucks a head you'd think they'd do better than a goddamned tent," Sebastian said to no one in particular.

"Hey, this tent is the same type used for regular haunted houses," Dave said. "I've seen them for rent in some of the horror magazines I buy."

Sebastian wasn't listening, for as he passed through the opening into the attraction, he noticed a sign over the entrance that read "Pandemonium." Grinning, he thought, that's exactly what I want to give them.

Once inside, the group was led to a couple of eight-foot long folding tables, behind which sat leaders of the Christian youth group that produced Damnation House. Along with the youths was an adult who only seemed interested in monitoring the ticket sales. In roughly the same order as they entered the tent, the group paid the admission charge and got their hand stamped with an image of a pitchfork. They were then led further into the tent where a "demon" took charge of the group as its tour guide.

"I am Azrael, Angel of Death. I'll guide you through Damnation House, but before we begin I must warn you not to interfere with anything you see. If it becomes too terrifying for you, turn around and face away from the scene. If it's really too scary for you, there are puny mortals stationed at each scene who'll lead you out. Remember that detail, it could save your sanity. Now let's begin the journey. Follow me." He led the crowd through a black curtain.

The next room was in near total darkness - some light trickled in from over and under the black curtains that hung everywhere and from the passageway openings, but it was only enough to keep from walking into a wall, or a fellow audience member. Azrael kept calling the tour group into the room, but it was so dark Sebastian could barely make out the guide's form. Suddenly a single light shone on Azrael, who remained silent until the full group gathered along a rope corridor designated as the group's standing area. Around Azrael were black cloth dividers positioned to allow space for the first "scene." It was so dark that Sebastian had to squint to see anything; all he could make out was the vaguest outline of a bed.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Damnation House, where you're really damned if you do," Azrael said, sounding like a late-night horror movie host. As he spoke, he gestured behind him and overhead lights that targeted certain areas illuminated the scene. It was a hospital scene with a teen Christian youth lying in a bed. The actor had lesions on his face and rubber tubes were taped to his arm and into his nose. Old "ham radio" equipment that was supposed to be medical monitors were stacked on the far side of the bed. Sebastian was impressed by both the stage design and the makeup job. The student actor took his cue and began to make his breathing labored and heavy. From the darkness another actor made up as a demon took up a position at the foot of the bed. Azreal approached the second demon and said, "Pestilence, he's one of yours?"

Pestilence nodded and said, "Full blown AIDS."

"He's close to death?"

"Yes. Sin convinced him that he was born homosexual and the fool believed it. He never understood his creator made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve. So he went on sinning and this is what he gets. A hideous death followed by damnation for his sins." With that, both "demons" laughed.

When they stopped, Azrael said, "Are you ready to take him?" The demon nodded and Azrael placed his hand on the patient's chest holding it for few seconds until the actor went limp. Azrael then cupped his hand and offered it to Pestilence saying, "Take him to Hell for all eternity."

Pestilence cupped his hands as if he had been given something. As he did so, Pestilence said, "With pleasure. We've got a special place for his kind," and the hospital set went dark.

Azrael moved closer to the group and said, "His own sins condemned him not only to an early death, but also to eternal damnation. Only a fool

wouldn't be terrified of that, but some people think they know better. Now follow me," he said leading the group through another curtain.

Sebastian then heard a voice say, "follow." He looked behind him, but couldn't determine who spoke.

The same basic action occurred at the second station as at the first—Azrael took up a position under a single light and didn't speak until the crowd was again assembled and focused on him—that same action would be repeated for the rest of the tour. At the second stage Azrael said, "Some young people have come to allow music to dominate their life. Fortunately for us who serve the Evil One, there are musicians who care more about their bank accounts than their fans. He then gestured to the stage—obviously the signal to begin—and said, "Behold one such young man who has allowed music to dominate his life to the point it has come between him and what is truly important."

The overhead lights were a combination of red, yellow and blue and the thumping of heavy metal music reverberated from the surrounding dark. The stage was decked out as a teenager's bedroom with rock posters; an unmade bed and a chest of drawers that were partly open with clothes half out. A video game was set up near the stereo, and next to the sound system was another demon. In the middle of it all was a typical young "head banger;" who was identifiable by his jeans and black T-shirt emblazoned with the band "Oedipuss and the MFers." Hanging next to the youth—directly over a kitchen chair—was a noose.

Azrael moved next to the new demon and said, "Is he ready?"

The new demon in this scene was dressed exactly as the head banger and he moved in a jerky, unexpected manner. Speaking in a "slacker slur", the head banger demon said, "Almost, give me a minute dude." The demon then moved next to the teen and said to the group, "He's listening to the Satan inspired song 'Sweet Suicide' by the hardcore masters Oedipuss and the MFers. He's ready. I just need to give him a little help." With that, the demon rolled his eyes and mugged for the audience.

While Sebastian wasn't a big fan of Oedipuss, he recognized the song and reasoned it was picked for this because the band had been unsuccessfully sued by the families of some kids who had killed themselves while listening to the song. Lawyers argued the song inspired the kids to take their own lives. Like they have any clue as to why those kids offered themselves, Sebastian thought. Oedipuss won those lawsuits and the

allegation that the song might have been involved sent sales of that disc into space. Despite the fact millions of rockers listened to the song and hadn't killed themselves, it only took four or five kids who did kill themselves to get these Christian Nazis to include it as part of their program, Sebastian thought shaking his head.

As Sebastian considered the scenario, the Head Banger demon moved behind the teenager and said, "What are you waiting for, boy? No one loves you. No one cares. The music is telling you what to do, so do it already! Do it already!"

The teen stepped onto the chair and placed the noose around his neck. Despite knowing this was just a play, Sebastian's heart picked up speed. He was sure he heard someone say "watch" and he became convinced the voices were part of the show. Some type of special effect. May as well do what it says, he thought and by intently focusing on the actor, he could see the youth hadn't tightened the rope. Obviously that was for a quick and easy removal in an emergency.

"Jump!" the Head Banger demon yelled. "Jump, jump, jump... (he was keeping time with the music) jump, jump..." The boy then picked up a foot and the light around him went dark.

On the other side of the set a light illuminated Azrael who said, "Now follow me and you'll witness what the pro-death groups want to keep hidden from you." He then moved past another curtain.

The next stage again held a hospital-like setting, but more clinical than the previous. It was an examination room, complete with a gurney as the exam table. On the table was a girl, covered in a sheet, but with a screen blocking the view below the girl's waist. Sebastian could see another demon —this time a female—dressed as a nurse complete with cap but instead of a red cross it had an inverted pentagram. The demon nurse stood near the head of the table and was whispering to the girl as the audience gathered. It took time for the group to form and Sebastian could hear sounds from other parts of the tent. No doubt other tour groups were moving from scene to scene, he thought.

The last of the group made it into the area and Azrael said, "The patient before you is about to go from a small, very forgivable sin, to a much larger sin that will get her damned for all eternity, but let's watch as our specialist gets on with her work."

That was the nurse's cue to address the crowd. "This is so easy because the work is already done for me. She thinks it's all about choice and the life of the baby doesn't mean anything." She then went back to talking to the girl—who really looked scared, good acting, thought Sebastian—but much louder. "You're not killing your baby. It's really just a big gob of snot, so it's like blowing your nose."

With that a man dressed in medical scrubs and carrying a clipboard entered. He stood at the end of the table, and kept his attention on the clipboard, while never looking at the girl. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Terrible," she said weakly.

"That's good, now this will only take a minute," and he reached beyond the screen and—while the girl tensed up and was very convincing at relating pain—pulled doll parts covered in red goo which he dropped into a bucket at his feet.

Members of the audience winced and someone said "gross." But Sebastian quietly said, "cool."

"There, that wasn't so bad. Now make sure you fill out the insurance forms before you leave," said the doctor who then exited the stage.

"I love the medical profession," Azrael said with an evil smile.

The nurse demon held up the bucket and said, "This small clinic produces 50 of these a day." She sloshed the contents around and said, "You make 'em, we scrap 'em. No fetus will beat us." She then held the bucket at her side and said, "As a professional abortionist, the doctor has earned damnation thousands of times over, but this is the only sin she has against her soul and it's enough to get her damned for all time too. All it takes is one."

Azrael nodded and smiled his evil grin. The lights in the clinic slowly dimmed until they went out and Azrael again stood under a single light. He said, "We've got one more stop to make, if you think you can take it, follow me," and he passed through yet another curtain.

Once in the area with the final scene, despite the dark, Sebastian could see the stage was designed to be a graveyard. There were fiberboard tombstones that looked like the real thing, but on each there were words one would never find in a real cemetery. In large letters they said, "SODOMITE," "SUICIDE" and "BABY KILLER." Except for the words, Sebastian thought it was one of the best graveyard scenes he'd viewed. "In this scene you'll see some fools who think they can worship the Evil One.

Watch and learn the truth.” The lighting over the graveyard increased enough for the audience to see more, but it still maintained an illusion of a nighttime setting.

From off stage, a group of five teenagers entered, but four of them—split between boys and girls—were dressed in a manner that could only be described as “Goth,” while one was wearing a black robe over a school uniform. They surrounded a girl dressed as a cheerleader, her hands were tied behind her back; she was gagged and her mascara was streaked as if she really had been crying. Nice touch, Sebastian thought. A demon, which was very different from the other demons in the earlier plays, emerged from the dark. This new demon had an aristocratic air about him—an adult was obviously playing him. Azrael approached him with a bowed head. “A sacrifice for you, my master,” he said, gesturing to the cemetery scene. Azrael bowed deeply and backed from the new demon saying, “All hail the Evil One.”

The new demon gave an exaggerated haughty nod and Sebastian understood this was supposed to be Satan himself. The “demon” was in whiteface, but wore a seamless head piece that had two large natural looking horns going up and two longer horns that hung on the back of his head like pony tails. “Nice,” Sebastian said admiringly.

The actors must have taken Azrael’s exit as their signal to begin for one said, “In order for us to become real vampires we have to go beyond drinking each other’s blood. We have to drink the blood of a virgin that is sacrificed to the Prince of Darkness. Once we do that, he’ll reward us with magical powers like the kids have in *The Wizard’s Apprentice* books we’ve been reading since we were young.” Sebastian thought the kid speaking was a lousy actor and if he’s looking for a virgin, he’s got the wrong cheerleader.

In unison, the three students dressed as “Goths” said, “Yes, Satan will make us sorcerers.” The Goth who was supposed to be the leader produced a ceremonial looking dagger and raised it over the cheerleader. She struggled, but the three other Goths held her steady. The lead Goth then placed the knife—which Sebastian recognized as a theatrical prop—on the cheerleader’s throat and made a slashing motion. A Goth quickly positioned himself between the audience and the girl, blocking the tour group’s view of her neck. The girl slowly slumped to the floor and when the Goth moved, his face was smeared with red. So was the girl’s neck and the floor held a pool of red that must have been hidden with a cloth that the Goth actor

pocketed when he helped the girl “fall” to the floor. The other Goths all took a turn “drinking” the girl’s blood by bending over her neck and each mouth was smeared with fake blood when they pulled back.

Considering they did this on almost no money, it wasn’t a bad effect, Sebastian thought.

After the last Goth’s face was sufficiently smeared, “Satan” turned to Azrael and said, “Those fools dared to dabble in the occult and killed to please me. The only reward they can expect is eternal damnation. There’s a special place in Hell for such imbeciles including the author of *The Wizard’s Apprentice* books [Satan held up a copy of the first in the popular series], but they do a beautiful job of introducing children to the occult.” The lights then went dark on the scene.

God, these fascists will attack anything, Sebastian thought. I wonder if they celebrate Christmas with a book burning.

“Satan” stood under a single light. “Everything that has gone on in Damnation House has been at my command. Soon you’ll leave, but it’s very possible that we’ll be meeting again and next time there won’t be any way out,” he said, laughing as the light faded.

For a few seconds there was total darkness, but a voice near an illuminated “exit” sign suddenly filled the room and Wayne Keating, the head of the school’s youth ministry, said, “This is the end of the horror scenes of Damnation House. If you’ll come with me you’ll see how faith and prayer can fight back.” Wayne then opened another curtain and stepped through and the group followed.

Wayne led them down a vinyl corridor to a large section of the tent that was full of chairs and a real stage. On the stage were several large men whose attention was centered on a woman in her mid-20s. Next to the woman stood a man shouting at her. On one side of the tent was a table manned by teens who were clearly members of the youth ministry. It resembled the table where Sebastian bought his admission ticket. Next to the table was an area roped off with plastic yellow tape that said “wet paint.” Wayne led the group to that area and quietly said, “You can watch Rev. Todd do the Lord’s work for 15 minutes at which time, we have to make room for another group. But, for an additional \$15 donation you can stay and pray with us, or just watch the reverend provide deliverance. Make your donation at one of the tables and you can take a seat in the audience. Thank you.” He then turned back to the tour side of Damnation House.

Sebastian looked at the stage and saw a man who must be Rev. Todd shouting at a woman who he presumed to be in need of an “exorcism.” She sat on a couch and the reverend sat on a folding chair positioned so he could direct his prayers and commands at the woman. On the far side of the stage was another woman—this one much younger—who must also be “possessed” for she was lying on a mat surrounded by a group of older men and women who held Bibles and who were reciting prayers. The woman on the mat was moaning and rocking back and forth. Apparently to keep the woman from rolling away, a man was kneeling near her head with his hands on her shoulders. A video crew was positioned at the front and the periphery of the stage and what was occurring was being projected on a screen positioned on the opposite side of the stage. They’re probably recording the exorcisms for sale as a video, or to be broadcast on the next television appeal for money, Sebastian thought. “Bring on the spinning heads, bring on the puking, bring on the God-damned freak show!” he said.

As if in response to Sebastian’s request, Rev. Todd’s voice grew louder as he read passages from the Bible while placing his hand on the woman’s forehead. “Leave this woman, leave this woman, leave this woman I command you in the name of Jesus Christ!” he said.

The woman began to shake and vibrate. She then sprang to her feet and started waving her arms in several directions. Sebastian found it funny and said, “She’s nuts.”

“Crazy,” someone said, but the voice seemed to come from above Sebastian out of the dark. It caused the teen to wonder why they would have the special effects in this area. It must be to support the creepy shit on the stage, he reasoned.

Rev. Todd stepped away from the woman and large men who sat just off stage moved quickly to push her back onto the couch. The reverend then approached the woman from behind and placed his hands on the top of her head while holding the Bible in his other hand and said, “Foul thing that holds this woman hostage, listen to when Jesus met ‘two possessed with devils... and there was a good way off from them a herd of swine feeding... so the devils besought him saying if thou cast us out, suffer us to go away into the herd of swine... and he said unto them, Go! And when they were come out, they went into the herd of swine!’ I command you in the name of Jesus, by the blood of Jesus, join the swine!”

During the reading, the woman slumped, her head down on her chest and looked out at the audience from the top of her eyes. Sebastian thought it made her look exhausted, crazy and a little dangerous all at once, but he soon changed his opinion on how exhausted she was, for after Rev. Todd finished, she jumped off the couch and began shaking and twitching. The reverend's helpers tried to subdue her, but the woman's jerky movement prevented them from getting a good hold on her. Then, just as suddenly, the woman dropped prone onto the stage floor giving the helpers the opportunity to hold her down as the reverend continued to read Bible passages. In response to the passages, the woman yelled, "Shut up! Shut up! Shut Up!"

"Beatrice Carter, fight the lying demon that holds you. Use your love of Jesus and fight your way free!" the reverend said.

"I'm not lying!" Beatrice yelled.

"Be gone from this servant of God. Be gone now! Cleanse the body of the evil that has taken it. Cleanse it the way God cleanses this world!" the reverend said.

Beatrice then started to shake her head back and forth, but after about 20 seconds of that, she calmed down and lay on the floor taking deep breaths. The reverend stood and turned to the audience. He wiped sweat from his face and said, "If her faith is deep enough, the demon that held her should be expunged and she delivered, but only time will tell that." The reverend then turned his head and said something unintelligible. Very quickly Wayne joined him while others helped the woman to her feet and directed her off the stage.

"That's it. That's the big exorcism I stood in line to see," Sebastian said to his friends. "It's a bunch of bullshit."

"Yeah!" said Rick. "I wanted her to upchuck or something weird. She didn't even swear. I'll bet she's not possessed. It's more like she's crazy."

"It's not like that," Dave said. "It's not like in the movies."

"Let's see if they can tell," said Sebastian crossing the yellow tape. A female member of the youth ministry quickly approached him asking for the additional \$15. Because Sebastian felt cheated, he harshly replied, "No way, bitch, I need to talk to the reverend."

Rev. Todd was talking to Wayne when Sebastian jumped onto the stage and started yelling, "you fuckn' bastard. You don't speak for anyone,

especially God or Jesus. I know you can't exorcise me, you stupid son-of-a-bitch!"

The reverend's security detail moved on Sebastian, keeping him from reaching the reverend and pulling him to the sofa. But Rev. Todd approached Sebastian and after a quick examination, the reverend said, "Yes, he's possessed. I'll start immediately."

Sebastian remained on the sofa and Rev. Todd took a position in front of the teen. Pointing his Bible at Sebastian, the reverend said, "Any spirits, evil or otherwise, are commanded in the name of Jesus Christ to reveal your presence! All spirits are subject to the authority and power of Jesus, so in the name of our Lord and Savior, come forward from this boy and show yourself!"

Sebastian wasn't sure how long he was willing to play along with this bullshit, but at the same time he thought, how often does an opportunity like this come along? He then looked at the reverend and said, "you can't make me do shit, asshole!"

Rev. Todd responded to Sebastian's insults by commanding the spirit to identify itself. "In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, you are commanded to share your name and leave this boy!"

"The trick's on you, asshole! I'm not possessed, I just made it up to show everybody what a dickwad you are," said Sebastian, who then started to stand up from the sofa.

"Hold him," Rev. Todd said to his adult assistants who snapped into action and grabbed Sebastian by his biceps and wrists.

"Whoa... wait a minute, I said I'm not possessed. It's just some bullshit I made up!"

"Place him on a mat and hold him down," the reverend ordered. The assistants then increased their already steely grips on Sebastian's upper arms and wrists and they picked him up. Since Sebastian was a lean youth, the assistants had no trouble moving him to a mat where two more adult assistants each firmly grabbed an ankle.

"What the fuck are you assholes doing?!" Sebastian yelled. "Let me the fuck out of here!"

In response to Sebastian's tirade, Rev. Todd knelt next to the teenager and held out the Bible while ordering the spirits out of the youth.

After a few moments of that, Sebastian decided the best thing to do was get his captors to ease their grips, so he relaxed his body, almost as if he

were going to take a nap. That caused the assistant on Sebastian's right to reduce his hold on the teen's wrist. In a move that caught them all by surprise, Sebastian pulled his right hand free to punch the assistant holding his left arm in the chest. However, the assistants were very experienced at restraining those being exorcised and they immediately recovered. In addition, in an effort to keep the teen from breaking free, the assistant who lost control of Sebastian's right arm dropped onto the youth's chest. The weight of the full grown man landing on the 150 pound teen knocked the wind right out of Sebastian and the situation only worsened for the teen because he couldn't resume breathing.

Sebastian panicked and started flopping around underneath the assistant. He tried to speak, but it was impossible to even inhale, much less talk. Adding to Sebastian's difficulty at making a sound was the fact the reverend continued to yell at the youth, drowning out all noise. Because he knew he couldn't last long in his present situation, Sebastian's mind raced to find a way out. However, the lack of air was quickly taking a toll on the youth, so in a last, desperate effort to fill his lungs, Sebastian burst forth with all the strength he had left into a convulsion that he hoped would get the "fat ass" off of his chest. The last thing Sebastian was aware of was a voice saying "you're dead," and he was gone.

Sebastian found himself looking down on the stage. He could see Rev. Todd's assistants in the same area and position as when he blacked out, but he had no idea what they were doing now, or how he climbed up in the tent's riggings. That's when Sebastian realized he wasn't holding onto anything but he was so high in the tent that he was floating. Sebastian wasn't well versed on near-death experience, but he had seen enough television shows on the phenomena to make an educated guess about what he was experiencing. After a long 30 seconds reviewing his situation, he yelled, "It's not fair!" He began to scream at the assistants demanding they get off of him. But no matter how loud he yelled, they ignored him and very quickly it became obvious they couldn't hear him. Around that point, the spirit that was Sebastian realized that Rev. Todd was continuing with the exorcism, and despite the ample movement of the reverend's mouth, Sebastian couldn't hear anything coming out. He found the silent action frightening. If he'd been neutral on silent movies before, he hated them now. "It's not fair!" he continued to shout in his apparition voice until he heard voices from the dark.

“The worthless fool denied our existence!”

“Now he can show the others what they came to see.” There was mad laughter.

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When Sebastian opened his eyes, the two church officials—including a woman who had been administering CPR and believed him beyond help—were surprised by his resurrection. The woman was so surprised she let loose a high-pitched scream.

Sebastian sat up and looked out at the audience. To his surprise he saw a visible change in the emotional states of the scores of frightened people. They must have seen me die, he thought and, as the realization that Sebastian was alive set in with the crowd, their faces went from worried fear to relieved joy. They must be happy I’m not dead, he thought. That was confirmed by the male church official who was administering CPR when Sebastian returned to life. The official said, “He was dead! I’ve done emergency medical work for 25 years and he was dead. I was only going on with the CPR because state law says once started, it has to keep going until the medics arrive. If I stopped I could lose my certification. This is a miracle!”

“A miracle!” someone shouted and the word “miracle” swirled around the tent.

Suddenly the voice that had spoken to Sebastian while he was on the other side filled his mind. It said, “Since they came to see a show, let’s not disappoint them.” Sebastian stood. But it wasn’t that he was standing that surprised the crowd, it was how he stood. His body lifted from the floor as if he was a marionette and, in one fluid motion he went from prone on his back to standing. The audience turned to Sebastian as he asked the crowd, “Who here wants to go to Heaven?!” About half the audience raised their hands while the other half smiled and shifted their weight from foot to foot as they tried to not look too embarrassed by the question. Those who raised their hands seemed earnest in their replies. Sebastian, on the other hand, didn’t know why he asked that, and he was really surprised when he said, “Well I’ve got news for you all! GOD IS DEAD!... And I’ve got the pictures to prove it!”

Sebastian wasn't sure what was happening, but a man in the front pointed at him and shouted, "His face. I can't believe it, it's crazy!" As he spoke, the man backed away from the stage, then turned and ran.

While the man was the first to sense danger, most of the rest of audience kept their attention on Sebastian who said, "You came here on the pretext of faith and prayer and you were willing to use the suffering of others to be tourists across the veil. All for the flimsiest of reasons... your amusement." The words came from Sebastian's mouth but it clearly wasn't his voice. If real menace could be categorized by sound, the voice coming from Sebastian's mouth would've set the standard. "So see the truth and be amused!" he screeched at the crowd. By then the change in Sebastian's face was obvious to even those furthest from the stage and many turned to flee. The panic that ensued could be compared to the pandemonium that would ensue in a crowded theater that was on fire, and while the hysterical tirade the voice unleashed on the audience could be called screaming, the crowd was engaged in actual screams of fear. Flight was the first reaction of many and they ran for the exits, but the passage ways that led them to the tent had disappeared. However, that didn't prevent audience members from frantically looking for any exit and those with higher IQs and stronger senses of self preservation sought to escape under the tents' walls. But they found that what had been durable vinyl when they entered the theater section of the tent had become as hard and heavy as granite making it impossible to lift. And, for some audience members—the elderly and infirm who went to Damnation House to pray for the deliverance of souls—running was a luxury they'd never get to attempt. Rather, they focused their energies on turning away from Sebastian—or the Sebastian-thing he'd become—because more than anything they didn't want to look at his face. But they soon found that too was impossible.

While Sebastian was powerless to control his body and stop what was happening, he was fully aware of the events and soon found himself looking straight into the faces of everyone in the tent simultaneously. His visage was only inches away from the faces of Dave and the rest of his friends, Reverend Todd, the youth leader Wayne, the people in his tour group, and—as best he could comprehend—every member of the audience. How he could be so close to all those faces at the same time was beyond his ability to reason. In addition, he soon found that everyone in the tent was trying to turn their heads away, but it didn't matter, for in whichever direction they

turned, Sebastian was there, his face locked onto theirs. The teenager didn't know how he knew, but it was time to deliver the message he had been selected to impart. To do that, Sebastian's eyes bored straight into everyone that was looking at him and after a few seconds the shouting began.

"Oh my God, what is that?!" yelled a voice from the crowd.

"And what's it doing?!" shouted another.

That was quickly followed by, "It's shaped like a person, but it's not!"

A fourth person said, "It can't be! The way it is, it's not right!"

A fifth said, "But it is! We know what it is, it's a damned soul! What are those things with it?"

"What are they doing to it?" said another. "What are they doing?"

"Look!" said a member of the Christian Youth, fear filling his voice, "they see us, those things see us, they're pointing at us!"

"He's right, look at that one, it's coming toward us. We've got to get out of here. Someone do something!"

"It's the most hideous thing, it's even uglier than that face!" screamed a woman as the thing moved close to the Damnation House audience. Once it was on them it spoke in a language none of them spoke, but all understood.

"It's telling us we can leave, no, wait, it's telling us what we have to do to leave," said a random member of the audience.

"I can't do that," said man in near panic. That caused the hellish creature to move next to the man, bringing the damned soul with it. The creature's appendages enveloped the soul and it began to do things, unbelievable things, evil things, all of which shocked the crowd and filled them with disgust and horror.

Some were nauseated by what they saw, and someone soon yelled, "I can't stand what it's doing! I can't!" His shouting was then replaced by screams, and the tour group knew what was happening.

"I can't take this either!" yelled another and that was followed by more screams. Soon individual screams were erupting from within the tour group until they had all returned to the place from whence they came.

Sebastian was overwhelmed. There were scores of people rolling and twitching on the ground in agony. Men, women children, their hands soaked in blood, their faces covered in gore, their eye sockets... their eye sockets empty.

He moved frantically among the crowd. He wanted to help, but he didn't know how, or even where to start. By chance he stumbled upon

Jimmy. He grabbed Jimmy and said, “What happened to you?! How did this happen?!”

Through the pain and fear Jimmy recognized Sebastian’s voice. He said, “It said this was the only way out!”

“Out... out of where? None of you went anywhere!”

“Hell! We all went to Hell. We saw what goes on there. To leave I had to let it take my eyes. But that fuck’n thing fooled us. I let it take my eyes, but I can still see it in my mind! It’s as if I still have my eyes because I can still see it! Hell, I can still see it, the thing wants me to see, it wants me to see,” he said, sobbing.

Sebastian let go of Jimmy and the teen sank to the ground, hands covering his face. Sebastian then spotted the exit. Sure there wasn’t anything he could do to help those people, he exited the tent. “Home” was his only objective and he was soon off the church campus and onto a street where he ran into a group of “trick-or-treaters.”

There were about a dozen kids and adults and Sebastian wanted to pass them as quickly as possible. The adults and older kids ignored him as he passed, but the younger children looked at him. Sebastian couldn’t understand why the young kids would look at him—possibly they were proud of their costumes and hoped to get him to notice how they were dressed—but in doing so they looked into his face and then into his eyes. Before Sebastian was ten feet from the group high-pitched screams pierced the dark of Halloween.

THE MAN IN GRAY

Kevin L. Jones

“So this is a Halloween party?” Jacob Zimmermann muttered to his wife Roz who stood next to him in the apartment doorway.

Suddenly he did not feel so foolish in his Phantom of the Opera costume as he looked at his neighbors’ colorful outfits. He scanned the crowd and saw ghosts, witches, skeletons, hobos and cowboys.

Jake whispered the word, “Halloween.” It felt foreign as it rolled off of his tongue. They did not have this holiday in his native Poland but apparently it was a big deal here in his new home, New York City.

Gerald, the man that lived two doors down from them, rushed over to greet them. The bells on his jester’s hat jingled merrily as he shook Jacob’s hand. He led the Zimmermanns over to a table of refreshments and told them to dig in. Jacob poured himself a glass of punch and was about to put it to his lips when an attractive young woman in a maid’s costume bumped into him, causing the glass to slip from his grasp. She muttered her apologies and faded back into the crowd.

Jacob bent down to retrieve the glass. He glanced underneath the table and on its other side he saw a pair of gleaming highly polished black marching boots. Jacob’s face went white. He knew those boots. He would know them anywhere. He had cleaned, polished and repaired them a hundred times in the cobbler shack when he was a prisoner at Sobibor concentration camp. Without meaning to, Jacob began to rub the serial numbers tattooed on his forearm. This could not be the owner of those boots. He was long dead. Jacob had killed him, blown his heart out through his chest with a purloined KR98 during the revolt at Sobibor in which he and his wife had won their freedom. Jacob saw the boots turn and begin to move away. He quickly stood and could see flashes of field gray uniform moving in between the partygoers. A peaked S.S. officer’s hat bobbed above the heads of the other guests. Its metal skull and crossbones gleamed in the light. Jacob grabbed the arm of a nearby man dressed as a Yankee’s ballplayer. Jacob gestured wildly across the room and asked a little louder than he had intended, “Who is that man over there the one in the gray uniform?”

The intoxicated ballplayer looked to where Jacob pointed with glassy eyes. He slurred, "Sorry feller, I can't see anybody like that." He shook himself loose from Jacob's grasp.

He turned towards his wife and when she saw the look on the side of her husband's face that was not covered by the Phantom's mask she became terribly concerned. "Jacob, what in the world is the matter? You look as if you've seen a ghost."

"It's nothing, dear. It's just that I saw somebody that I want to talk to. Wait here; I'll be right back." Jacob elbowed his way through the crowd towards the man in gray. No, it could not be the S.S. officer that he had killed years back. That monster lay rotting in his grave somewhere in Europe. This was just some fool in a Nazi uniform. Jacob was going to give this moron a piece of his mind. He saw the man in gray disappear into a room. Jacob smiled; even better when they were alone, he would give him a punch in the nose.

He followed the man, shutting the bedroom door, sealing them in together in the darkened room. Jacob could just make out the man in the S.S. uniform standing with his back to him. He fumbled with the light switch and when the room was illuminated, his heart nearly stopped beating. He was no longer in the apartment's bedroom in New York. He had somehow been transported to the gas chambers of Sobibor. Jacob looked at the S.S. man. Blood dripped down his back. He turned and there was a large gaping hole in his chest where his heart should have been.

The S.S. officer that Jacob had killed years ago grinned. "It's very good to see you again, Mr. Zimmermann. I've been waiting for a very long time for this. Tonight is Halloween, Mr. Zimmermann, and on this night, if the conditions are just right, my Master will release a select few souls from Hell to walk the Earth and do his bidding. We want you down there with us, Mr. Zimmermann. I get so lonely sometimes in the endless darkness. I want you there with me forever to keep me company." The S.S. man began to cackle madly as the room flooded with a cloud of Zyklon B.

Jacob turned and screamed as he clawed at the door desperately trying to escape but there would be no escape. Jacob Zimmermann was going on a long trip into the dark void. Sobibor had claimed its last victim.

TRIBUTE TO SAMHAIN

Brian Barnett

Dying leaves crumble
Paying tribute to Samhain
Parade the children.

HOW'S TRICKS?

Ken L. Jones

Danny Farnsworth stood at the front of Applebee's pumpkin patch, bathed in the orange beams of the rising moon. The place which had been bustling and chockfull of pumpkins and the people who wanted to buy them all through the daylight hours of the month of October was now awash in silhouettes and shadows and little else. The thousands of variously shaped orange spheroids which had once made up its inventory and very reason for existing were now either sold or given away to charity and tomorrow would be on their way to the city dump where crows would eat them and then redistribute their seeds as they flew so that new pumpkins would come from them next year. Even old Jelly Belly, the town drunk, who had been the night watchman for this place, was back tonight sleeping on the park bench beneath the greening bronze statue of President Teddy Roosevelt when he was a Rough Rider. Old Jelly Belly would slumber there till Applebee needed him again to watch over the Christmas tree lot that would be in the same spot soon after turkey time.

Danny loved the pumpkin patch and had visited it many times to browse and play there just as he always had in Halloweens past. Now that he was in the sixth grade he finally felt old enough to go in there and have a look around by himself for the first time ever in the dark to see if the place was really haunted like the other kids in his class insisted that it was. As he entered this inky sea he drew strength from the Spider-Man costume he wore. Danny loved the wise-cracking web slinger and had first gone out years ago on Halloween night as him before he was even in school yet. That was back when Toby McGuire was Spider-Man in the movies and now some guy named Andrew Garfield was playing him but it really didn't matter. Spider-Man was Spider-Man and would always be worth emulating.

Danny had never been this much in the dark anywhere before and he didn't realize how much he didn't like that fact till he was almost halfway into the depths of the huge pumpkin patch. Trying to use his hands to feel where he was going in the dark seemed like a good idea until he found his fingers touching what seemed to be a man standing in front of him whom he couldn't see. This startled him so much that he was about to turn and run

when suddenly the black clouds in the sky parted and a huge shaft of orange moonlight revealed that what he was touching was just the scarecrow that was the center piece of the lot. Danny chuckled to himself when he realized this but then almost swallowed his tongue in fear when he heard this inanimate thing speak to him.

“It ain’t polite kid to sit there and laugh like that without sharing the joke,” it somehow managed to articulate.

Danny broke out in a trembling sweat as he studied this thing which should not be alive. It was basically a scarecrow who looked very much like Ray Bolger’s character in the Wizard of Oz except that it had a jack-o-lantern head and had pumpkin vines and leaves poking out here and there from its raggedly clothed and cornhusk filled body.

“Come on, kid, speak up. I know you can talk, I’ve seen you do it when you hang around here. What are your plans for Halloween, pal?”

Danny was finally able to get his dry mouth to answer, “you know, the usual. I’m gonna go out and make my rounds and get my candy. Then I’m going home and watch the Scooby Doo marathon on the Cartoon Network.”

“Come on, buddy, you can level with me, Halloween’s about a heck of a lot more than that, isn’t it? It’s about pranks too, isn’t it and I happen to know that you’re into that big time, aren’t you?”

Danny just nodded sheepishly in affirmation.

“You don’t have to be shy with me, lad. I’m the guy who thought all that hogwash and tom-foolishness up a lot longer ago than you’d believe. Why you’re looking at the very guy who originated pranks at this time of the year.”

“If that was true, mister, you’d be pretty darn old, wouldn’t you?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you. I’m the first pumpkin ever. I was created a long, long time ago back when all the earth was still one continent by an old wizard named Jack. Everybody was so impressed by him doing it that forever after that they called him Grandfather Jack-o-lantern. When all the land became like it is today after the big flood, I struck out on my own and started traveling the world. Now every year I hit a different town and I pick out one lucky boy or girl to help me take part in the greatest prank of the whole Halloween season.”

Danny’s ears pricked up and he grinned mischievously at hearing this. “Is it a secret or can you tell me who you picked this year?”

"Why you bucko, who else? Why there ain't a more wound up prankster within this whole city than we're in than you, so how about it? You want to follow me and see not only the greatest prank that's going to take place in this town that you live in but anywhere that Halloween is celebrated tonight?"

Danny couldn't agree fast enough and after helping the pumpkin man down off of the scrap lumber platform that he was nailed up to they exited the pumpkin patch together. Danny's newfound companion took off at a full gallop and the young energetic boy had to work hard to keep up with him. As they made their way swiftly across town, Halloween was beginning to happen in earnest and it was a grand and jolly one indeed. But Danny could not be bothered by any of that now because he was so curious about what the greatest prank of the season was going to be that nothing else filled his mind.

After a long and colorful trip to the outskirts of town, Danny found himself following his new mentor through the ancient graveyard there and up the side of the mountain that buttressed it until they reached the bluff that overlooked the whole valley below. The pumpkin fell underneath a huge leafless maple tree and rested his back and head against it. He patted the ground next to him, indicating that Danny should do the same. From the vantage point of their high perch they could see everything that was happening in the town below all at the same time.

The jack-o-lantern grinned broadly as he watched all the high jinks and then he said, "Okay, Danny you can see that there are lots of pranks taking place down there; can you tell me which one of them is the grandest of them all?"

Danny did as he was asked to and observed all the action below with the studied eye of an expert prankster. He saw kids playing Ding Dong Ditch with other people's door bells. He saw the air being let out of car and truck tires. He saw folks having their lawn gnomes and plastic flamingoes being stolen, windows being soaped up, flaming paper bags of dog waste being placed on people's front porches. That was only some of it and all of this seemed ordinary to him. He certainly wasn't going to label any of this stuff as the best thing ever to his new-found guru so he kept on watching but nothing seemed to be particularly out of the ordinary to him. Through it all he did not notice how much time was passing and so he didn't realize the lateness of the hour and when the city hall clock tower struck twelve he was

shocked to note that Halloween was gone. As the last bong sounded, the pumpkin man rose to his feet and Danny did the same.

"I don't get any of this. How could any of that have been the greatest prank of this Halloween season?"

"It wasn't. The greatest prank of the season was pulled on you, stupid. You're so gullible that you wasted your whole night up here playing along with all this. Do you realize what I took away from you tonight? You're in the sixth grade; nobody in this town dresses up or goes out for candy after that. It will never be Halloween of 2012 again and you fell for it, you moron. That's what you get for being on the mean side of Halloween, you little jerk."

The impact of all this was more than Danny could stand and in order to get this creature to stop mocking him, he shoved him as hard as he could off the side of the cliff. He watched as a strong wind caught the scarecrow's body and ripped it to shreds, carrying the various pieces of it in four different directions at the same time. Then he watched as the jack-o-lantern head, still cackling and mocking him, plunged into the graveyard below where it shattered into a million mushy pieces on top of the ornate mausoleum that belonged to the town's first mayor.

Realizing all that he had lost, Danny wept pitifully for a time then gathered himself up and began the long journey home. As he quickly exited the graveyard and navigated block after block of the mostly deserted town, he realized that the grownup world that he had just taken the first steps into tonight was going to be full of many shocks and disappointments along the way, but he truly doubted that anything would ever stay with him more than the harsh lesson that the talking jack-o-lantern man had so cruelly taught him just minutes ago on a night that he would remember forever.

THE ARGUMENT

Matthew Wilson

Mother had never liked Halloween.

As long as Josh had been alive, he knew she despised it like no other holiday. Now he was ten, in double digits, he felt he deserved to go out. He'd made a cape of the kitchen curtains and used all Mother's make-up to turn his eyes quite beautifully dead.

He felt it was ridiculous that a great vampire such as he should be cooped up each year. Grounded when he had not committed a crime.

"Mother, please. I've looked forward to this."

"Get back in that kitchen and fix the damage you did to the curtain rings," Mother moaned. "And wipe that muck off your face. You look like a startled Panda."

Josh sulked in his room, wondering about the reason for her dislike of such a merry macabre evening as this. Maybe as a child Mother had been given apples filled with razor blades from a nasty neighbour.

He could not conceive of any other reason for her malice tonight.

What other child went to bed at six in the evening? Stubbornly, he lay down in his cape, listening to heavy rock pound through the stereo. He decided though Mother had removed the evening's magic, she would make a good witch.

It was nearly midnight when he woke, the stereo's battery dead and realised with a snap of curses, Mother was angry, shouting at spirits and Josh felt that usual rush of embarrassment run through him.

This was the worst of the night, when Mother had helped herself to a few gins and shouted at passing zombies staggering home, limping with their sacks of candy.

"Little scum should be at school!" she would yell at them, threatening to call police when they threw eggs and worse at her windows. This was a merry way for Mother to spend her time, but Josh still had to suffer laughter and funny looks at school the next morning.

There's the son whose mother won't let him out at Halloween.

Josh had had enough. Now he was in double figures, he supposed it was time he no longer lay there like a child. He would get up, dress and order Mother to stop embarrassing him, damn it. If he was to suffer here,

wasting his childhood, the least she could do was not make him hate her as well as himself for cowardice.

No wonder Father had walked out. He'd taken the brains of the males with him.

"Mom, please stop shouting!" he called from his door. "Settle down before they call the police-"

Josh stopped talking when he heard the deep man's voice flicker like a sweet serpent's promise.

Damn. It had finally happened, one of the trick or treaters had run home crying that a creepy old woman had clipped his ear. Now a six foot father had broken into the house, wanting revenge.

Maybe he had a real machete instead of those ketchup covered plastic ones sold in every store. He was speaking in whispers and seemed to be choking on his malice. To save himself being stabbed in the guts, Josh pressed his ear to the door. At the first sign of trouble he'd run for the phone.

"I said, out of my house," Mother said and Josh squatted, squinting through the keyhole.

"Look at you, so sweet and saintly in old age. When I met you, you were an animal. Does your boy know the amount of men you picked up, drugged and robbed to buy this place?"

Josh felt his heart try to kick through his chest on hearing the familiar click clack of Father's shotgun. Mother was threatening to kill the man, which he found ludicrous with her cataracts.

When Father had taken him hunting, killing beer cans strung on the backyard fence, Mother had gone nuts about the danger. The reason she had kept it when he walked out was for spite rather than affection for it.

"I've come for payment," the man said and Josh found it difficult to make out his details in the starlight pouring through the window. "You've known me long enough to realise I would find the rock you crawled under."

"You won't have my boy," Mother said, raising the weapon. "I've paid my blood."

"All those wonderful parties," the man whispered fondly.

"You made me do awful, terrible things. I can never break even on that score. My boy is the only good in my life. He stays."

"All that promise and you couldn't even have a child. I made that happen. Untied those tubes, you barren-"

Josh remembered to breathe when Mother threw a lamp at the man. It smashed against the wall where his head had been a moment before. Had it been plugged in, it might have set the wall alight.

It doused Josh's anxiety to see the man's face.

"I've paid my blood. I did what you wanted to those people for your sport."

"The parties finished, dear. You left motherhood too late. You said I could have one of your children. It was not my fault men found you repulsive you only managed to trick one of them into mating with you. I said I would come at Halloween and you have done well to make me wait for ten of them."

Josh jumped when something exploded and he threw himself through the door, into the gun smoke.

"Mom!"

The man was laughing as he grappled with his former slave. His claws raked her face, blinding her as Josh felt all spit drain from his mouth like a sponge in the sun. The gun smoke stank of sulphur, it hung at the back of his throat, strangling him.

"You couldn't hit the backside of an elephant- my boy!" the man laughed, changed the direction of his hate and, opening his red fists, let the woman drop like wet washing to the floor. "Don't be scared," he said. "That woman just bought you into the world; I can take you to a better one. She had promise, now her eyes are bad, she couldn't hit me-"

Josh jumped when the dark burned away and a window exploded. He thought the bullet had come into the house from outside. As it was, Mother had wrestled herself up onto her knees, braced the barrel across her arm and fired.

The man howled at the hole punched through his chest, angrily, he clawed at white light pouring out of him. "You won't cheat me!" he yelled. "You won't!"

The damage was too great for him to keep his footing. The light poured out of him and left so little flesh on his bones. Inch by inch, it liquidized, sinking to the ground like a copper puddle.

"I'll find your next rock," he wept. "I don't care if it takes ten more Halloweens! A deal's a deal. You won't run. You won't!"

His mouth turned to water at last and Josh woke with Mother's arms round his shoulders. Her body shook with sobs, begging forgiveness. "I'm

sorry, son. If I knew he would find us, I'd have let you have all the candy you wanted."

Josh's throat still burned with the stench of sulphur the hole in the window found hard to blast out with late October breeze.

Softly, he found himself asking if he could go out next Halloween.

"Yes," Mother said quickly, relieved to have him at all. "You can have all the Halloweens you want."

Josh did not care if Mother shadowed him with the shotgun for his own protection, firing at every shadow that came his way. It would be nice to be like other children for one night a year. Even if he didn't know entirely what he was.

FATHERS KNOW BEST

Chad Case

“Lousy kids,” Winston declared, looking down at the mangled mess that was his beloved pumpkin batch, “got no respect at all for other people’s property.”

“Dad,” Bo cried. “You don’t know that kids did this.” He put his hands in the pockets of his baggy jeans and shrugged. “It could’ve been animals.”

Winston snorted. “Boy, animals didn’t do this, kids did and tonight I’ll prove it. I’ll hide in that old shed-” he pointed a skewed finger at a deteriorating brown shed- “and wait on those disrespectful little brats. Then, when the moment is right, I’ll jump out at ‘em and scare the heck out of ‘em.”

Bo looked doubtful and bored with the conversation.

Winston inflated his massive chest. “Trust me, son, fathers do know best.”

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That night, Winston waited anxiously. It was about three when he heard the muffled voices of oncoming intruders. “It’s about time.” He glanced out a filthy window and saw two small figures coming through the moonlight. As they got closer, he could see a little boy wearing an oversized boot with a huge steel-toe cap on it and a small girl who wore the boot’s mate. “Kids,” he whispered, positioning himself by the door. “I knew it.”

The kids started to kick the remaining pumpkins: seeds and orange goop covered their cloths. They giggled softly and didn’t flinch when Winston jumped from the shed.

“Get out of here!” Winston bellowed, waving his arms madly. The kids stood there, staring at him as if he was the Easter Bunny, Tooth Fairy and Santa Claus all rolled up into one. Winston huffed. “What’s your parents’ name?”

Silence.

“Fine,” Winston said. “I’ll just call the cops.”

“Please don’t,” the girl yelled. “I’ll tell you.”

Winston walked over to her. She smiled shrewdly and kicked Winston in his shin with her steel-toe boot. He fell to the ground with a thud.

Winston's eyes fumed. "I'm gonna wear your ass out for that!"

"You shouldn't cuss," the boy said. "Because Daddy says that's the Devil's language."

The girl knelt down and patted Winston's sweaty head. "Do you know what else Daddy says?"

"No," Winston croaked.

"Daddy says that kicking pumpkins is the closest thing to kicking in a real person's head."

Winston drew deep, uneasy breaths. "Now you kids quit playing this silly game of yours, and go and get me some help."

The girl looked around and surveyed the pumpkin patch: fifty or more pumpkins bled out their remnants. "Brother," she said, turning her attention to the little boy. "Daddy said that once we perfected kicking in pumpkins that we can try the real thing, don't you think it's time we tried?"

The boy looked down at Winston who was shaking his head "no". He drew back his steel-toe boot and said, "Like daddy always says... fathers do know best."



## **FUN NIGHT**

*Neil Leckman*

We knew our trip into town was coming soon, because the night air was getting colder and the golden leaves were drifting to the ground. That was always a sign that the time was coming and we looked forward to it with eager anticipation. Mother came into the room and my brothers and I deluged her with a ton of questions, but the main one I wanted to know was what I asked her first.

“Mom, do I get to pick one this year? Tommy did last year and Jimmy the year before that,” I said as I looked up at her eagerly.

She looked down at me and raised one eyebrow. “Is it really your time this year? Hmm, it’s hard to believe that you’ve grown so much.”

“Please, I’m ready and I know what everyone wants, don’t I?” I asked and looked at my brothers.

They all said they agreed with me. Smiling, I looked back at Mom and waited.

“Well, it sounds like you’re going to pick this year,” she said as she smiled at me, “so I need everyone to get ready for our trip. We’re going today!”

“Yippee!” I ran over to my closet and started pulling out my best clothes.

Mom left the room and my brothers and I began getting ready to go into town. Of course we got in each other’s way and that led to a bit of wrestling, which led to a couple of playful shoves. It wasn’t long before Mom came in and pulled me off Doug, whose head I was banging vigorously against the hardwood floor. She yanked me into the air with one hand and glared at me. Without saying a word she stormed out of the room. I turned and punched Doug, who flew back against my oak dresser and slumped to the floor.

Moments later we were all outside next to the van, which was idling. Mother stood by the open door to the back and looked us over as we climbed in. Not finding anything wrong with our attire, she climbed in and we were off. We lived just outside a small mountain town that really celebrated Halloween in a big way. There were ghosts and goblins everywhere on the way into town and then it got better. There were lanterns

shaped like maniacal pumpkins across the store fronts. Mitchell's Variety Store had decorated the wooden Indian out front with a hockey mask and butcher knife. We pulled up in front of Mitchell's and followed Mom into the store. My brothers and I ran back to the costumes while Mom went over to the grocery section. Mitchell's always had some of those expensive rubber masks that went entirely over your head; some of them were always real scary. We were picking up masks and trying them on, laughing at how silly we looked when a local stoner walked up and stared at us. He didn't say anything for the longest time, as if he had to really ponder what question to ask. We continued to try on the different masks.

"Dude, that's an awesome mask, it looks so real. Where can I get one?" the stoner asked.

We all turned and looked at him, not sure which mask he was asking about. He reached out and touched my face and, startled, stepped back.

"Wow, that feels so real!" As he was saying that, Mom walked up behind him. She gave me with a questioning look and I nodded my head yes.

"OK, boys, it's time to go!" We followed her as she went to the register and paid for the bottles of herbs she had picked up.

We went out and climbed into the van. Mom drove a block and a half away from the store and we waited. Not much later the stoner headed our way. When he was walking along side the van the door slid open and Jake hit him with the hammer he was holding. The claw end sank into the back of the stoner's head with a loud crunch. The stoner said, "Oh wow!" and died. We quickly pulled him into the van and drove off.

Mom turned and smiled at us, "He looks like he'll make a great dinner to celebrate Halloween, and these new herbs should add a nice touch to his flavor. You picked a really good one for your first time. I'm so proud of you!"

My brothers all jokingly punched me and said, "Way to go!"

Yes, this was the year I became a man. The best part of that was the fact that after mom cooked him, I got to eat the testicles to celebrate my transition from boy to man. My brothers told me they tasted great. Now I'd find out for myself just how good. Yes, this was a special day.

"Hey, look what he had in his pocket," Jake said, holding up a large baggie full of pot. Yes, this was going to be a fun night indeed...



## THE DARK WOLF

*Ron Koppelberger*

The distance between yesterday and today was a decade of sacred hours and anaesthetic. The anaesthetic was a satisfaction that the urges were encased by cement and iron and the hours spent in quiet contemplation of the illness, the malady, the bother of need and sanguine aching force and the moment, the day, Halloween, for the sacred hunt and the desires of a dark wolf.

Astor Scow sat solid in his tethered moment of captivity. He was enveloped by the bond of prison existence. He drank in the thoughtfulness of half-starved desires. Nevertheless, he yielded to the asylum of metal bars, the dissension from the row, the hungry certain caress of time past; another Halloween in captivity. He sighed, the blood fresh in his mind, the carnage, the cringing seizure of a later vagabond occurrence in violence and measured themes of sin he had killed and the height of his passions always came on Halloween night. Asphalt and barbed wire ran the length of the yard. The croaking roar of a siren descrying its irritation in songs of freedom to Astor.

He had chewed the fat with divisions of death, sated, slaked in blood and rage. He had killed for need and desires of testimony to the wont that coursed through his arteries. He had killed for mad passions of power and efficient evolutions of unbroken transfer, the transfer of fountains and the spirit of necessity. He had killed in guise of eternal secret and picket fence fantasy, in flourishes of love and ever alert reverence, in reverence of the drive toward expediency, torn, engaged, unwearied by the push of wont. The distracted wholes of feeding wolves and nihilistic men, he thought in a certain contemplation. He had killed the length and breadth of homeward bound berths in wolf rule and in faithful prayer.

The siren continued and the cell door slid open with a clanging of gears and steel sliders. Tentatively, Astor explored the exterior of the cell. The resonant whoop of prison clamber filled the halls and maze of cells. Astor, undisturbed and full of purpose, moved through the open gate near the end of the cell block. Fundamental transformations began to overwhelm his senses as he traveled through another gate, closer to the outside world of freedom and chance, the chance of a lifetime.

Darkness filled the exit near the visitors' booth. No guards and a myriad of screaming inmates. Astor moved through the exit at a lope then a trotting caution then a galloping run, his paws fresh furred and clenching reflexively. Sanguine wolf sashays of freedom tinctured his escape. He saw the silhouette of another wolf for a moment, unbidden, near fields of saffron and wheat, near god's touch. The vision faded and scorched pathways of scared earth lay before him, his destiny on this a Halloween blessing.

In the grace of a winter reckoning Astor looked to the arid desert sands and agreements of dusty cactus bloom as he found his purpose.



## THE COFFIN CAME ON FRIDAY

*Jordan Elizabeth Mierek*

As if Olga's father hadn't been embarrassing enough when he hung the Christmas picture over the mantle – *that* picture, the one with her dressed in Hello Kitty pajamas, grinning to show off her new braces, while posing under the tree with her brand new snowboard – now he had to ruin the annual Halloween party. He should have stopped at yelling, "Be good today, you hear?" out the car window every time he dropped her off at school, because he wouldn't allow her to ride the bus – buses were filled with hidden flasks and drugs. She should've told him she could get those things in the hallways, but then she'd be stuck home schooled for her senior year.

The funeral home director counted her father's bills into his hands until he reached four-thousand and tucked the wad into his jacket pocket. Shouldn't a funeral director have on a black suit, rather than a leather jacket and jeans? The cowboy boots didn't bother Olga too much, though.

His assistant reached out to shake her father's hand. "We'll be back on Monday to pick it up. Better not have any bodies in it." He winked. "It's our job to put them there."

Her father laughed. "Don't worry about that. I'm only putting a glow-in-the-dark skeleton inside. The coffin will be as pristine as it is now."

Every year her father wanted to push the envelope on his Halloween party. Since friends and family tended to be gone on the *real* holidays, he made Halloween the time when everyone got to see each other. This year would be the best, according to him, since he'd rented a real casket. It would cost him one-hundred dollars, so he'd get back most of his four-thousand-dollar down payment.

"Alexei, this is so exciting," her mother gushed. "Everyone will be so surprised tomorrow."

"Gonna rig the casket to open and scare the shit out of folk?" The funeral director chuckled.

Now that would be cool. Olga could picture her friends from school screaming in delight. Having a coffin sit in the corner was just... weird. Like the rest of her family, who only spoke Russian.

"Thank you again," her father said.

"We'll be back on Monday," the funeral director reiterated. "Today's Friday, so that'll give you two full days with it. If it's broken, though, we'll have to charge you extra."

"Thank you, Friday Funeral Home." Her father winked. The two men didn't laugh, although Olga's mother giggled. Most people missed out on her father's sense of humor.

She folded her arms as she stared at the casket the two men had set on the card tables, side by side in front of the dining room windows. Fake spiders hung from the curtain rod and black gauze draped from the ceiling like stalactites. A plastic crow perched on the china cabinet, cawing every five minutes with a shriek that always made her jump.

Her older brother rapped his knuckles against the side of the greenish-blue casket. "Seems sort of hollow to me."

"It's made of boards." Her mother set a black candelabrum on the end of the casket as if every-day, normal people decorated caskets. "They use this kind for cremation."

Not like that was morbid or anything.

His girlfriend wandered over to link her arm through his. "Isn't it weird how a thing like this will be our last bed?"

"Isn't it weird how you people ogle over a casket?" Olga snorted. Why did he have to always have her around? She either hovered in the corner not saying anything, just judging with those cold blue eyes, or she was making inane comments.

Her father shut the front door and joined them, lifting the other half of the casket. "It's roomy inside."

"Dad!" Olga twirled the gold ring, engraved with her initials. "You shouldn't talk like that."

He lifted out the pillow and squeezed it. "Look at this nice pillow. It's firm."

"That's to keep the dead person's head up," her brother said.

"Do you want to use it tonight? You said your pillow was getting flat," her mother had the audacity to offer.

"*Dad*. You're not using a dead person's pillow!"

"There is no dead person in the casket yet." He blinked at her as if she was the crazy one.

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Throughout dinner, Olga couldn't stop glancing toward the coffin. It dragged her to it, whispering words she knew only she could hear.

Someday, you'll be here. Your final bed. Come try me out.

Olga shook off her shivers and finished stuffing mashed potatoes into her mouth.

The golden retriever took to barking at the coffin. He lurked under the table and growled low in his throat, the hairs standing up across his back.

"It's just a prop, Chowder." Her dad patted the dog's head. "It's not real."

"Yes it is," Olga muttered.

"He'll grow tired of it," her mother said. "It's just new."

The cats paced in the doorway, yowling, their gray tails poofed up in fright.

"See, even the cats are scared." The last thing Olga felt like doing was setting rubber squeak-toy rats around the house for the guests to discover. She dreaded inviting her friends to the soirees just because her father went so over the top each year, although the casket beat out all the rest. At least with her friends there, they could sneak up to her bedroom with a few bottles of wine, the labels carefully peeled off and replaced with stickers of skulls and cross bones.

"Poor kitties." Her brother's girlfriend, Dawn, scooped up Lace and nuzzled her fluffy face. "Does the casket give you bad vibes?"

It should've given them all bad vibes.

"What are you going to be tomorrow?" Dawn asked.

"Olga."

Dawn kissed Lace's cheek before setting the cat back on the floor. "I meant for the Halloween party. I'm going to be a steam queen."

"A what?"

Her brother slung his arm over Dawn's shoulder. "You and your steampunk fetish."

Was steampunk even a thing? Olga rolled her eyes.

"I'll drape some sheets over the room like this." Her father pointed at the dining room light fixture. "We can pull them back to reveal the casket and we'll have the toy skeleton sitting up. What do you think?"

"That sounds great," her mother gushed.

Her older brother and Dawn stuck their tongues in each other's mouths. Great. Now Olga could listen to them having college-graduate-but-still-living-home sex all night, mixed in with the musical notes of howling felines and a growling dog.

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Olga stared at the glow-in-the-dark stars taped to her ceiling. The glow had faded with the darkness of night and her father had finally turned off his "scary Halloween sounds" CD, which consisted of shrieks, chains, whips and moans, with a werewolf howl mixed in to liven things up.

Her brother and Dawn had finished, since the bed stopped creaking and Dawn had done that, "Oh, Sergey," moan.

Olga rolled over to stare out her window at the garage, which her father had outlined in orange lights. Nothing could escape his artistic Halloween-driven eye.

It had become too quiet. A shiver crept over her skin, numbing as it crawled. Why didn't she hear any of the home's bazillion clocks? What happened to the dog's pacing downstairs, that rhythmic tap of nail on hardwood floor?

Olga pushed back the blankets and padded down the hallway to the stairs in her argyle socks. Silence. Gripping the banister, she started down, one foot after the other. The hairs stood up along her arms beneath her pink silk pajamas.

She flipped on the light switch near the front door and the lights around the living room flash on, but in purple.

"Thanks, Dad," she muttered. The cats should've been asleep on the couch, but the living room hung empty with a palpable aura. Maybe they were still fixated on the coffin. At least it would be gone come Monday.

Olga stepped into the dining room, and froze. A hand hung out from the coffin. Had her dad already put the skeleton inside? It didn't glow, other than to be pallid. Trembling, Olga stepped toward it. When had her father gotten something that looked so realistic?

A scream burst from Olga's mouth before she could stop herself. Her mother lay in the coffin, her eyes open and lips parted, one hand hanging out, the other draped across her chest. Olga stumbled backwards, screaming into her knuckles. Why would her mother do that? It wasn't funny.

“Mom, get out!”

Silence. Didn’t anyone else hear her screaming? She grabbed her mother’s hand and jerked back. It felt cold, like a frozen mitten, but stiff. Rubbery.

“Dad!” Olga dashed into her parents’ bedroom, shoving open the door. She flipped on the light in the ceiling, glad he’d left that one a normal bulb.

The blankets lay rumpled in the center of the bed and the pillows had fallen askew, as though there had been a struggle. “Dad!” What had happened to the pets? The dog always came running whenever someone made a lot of noise and the cats should’ve been scrambling.

Maybe her parents were playing a trick on her, a horrible, nasty Halloween prank. She ran back to the dining room and froze. Bile rose in her stomach and she fought to keep down the nausea.

Her mother wasn’t in the coffin anymore. Her dad was. His mouth hung open like hers had been, but both of his arms lay overhead, hanging off the end. She seized one and it felt like her mother’s hand. She shook his shoulders, tears pricking her eyes.

“Dad, stop it! This isn’t funny!”

No pulse in his neck. No breath from his mouth. His gaze remained fixed on the ceiling.

“Help!” Olga dashed for the stairs, taking them two at a time. She tripped, smashing her shins, and smacked her palm into the railing. At the top, she fell into the wall, rolling across the carpet before scrambling back to her feet. She shoved open her brother’s bedroom door. Her chest heaved with pants as she flipped on his light, prepared to find an empty, messed bed.

Sergey swore, rubbing his hand over his eyes. Dawn groaned, burrowing deeper under his striped comforter.

“What is it, Olga?” her brother growled.

“Mom and Dad.” She sagged against the doorframe. “They were in the casket.”

“They’re not in the casket.” He sat up, the blanket crumpling around his waist to reveal his chest. His very naked, very hairy chest. Crap. Dawn was probably naked under there, too.

“I went d-downstairs,” Olga stammered. “Mom was in it. She wasn’t moving. I went to get Dad and... and...” A sob choked her throat and tears formed anew.

"It was a dream," came Dawn's muffled voice.

"Turn around so we can get dressed." Sergey leaned over his bed to yank a pair of plaid boxers off the floor. "We'll go figure this out so we can get back to sleep."

Olga knelt on the floor, her hands over her eyes. The last thing she wanted to see was skinny-as-a-stick Dawn without any clothes on, while Olga had to struggle not to stretch her muffin top any further.

How could she even think about that when her parents might be dead?

"Everything is worse at night," Dawn said.

"You don't understand! You didn't see them."

"Let's go downstairs." Sergey sighed. How could he keep from panicking? Olga clutched his hand while he led the way. Maybe he was right. It could've all been in her mind. She'd been freaking out earlier.

There weren't any sounds, though. Still. "Where's Chowder?"

"I'm sure he's sleeping with Mom and Dad."

"Where are the cats then?"

"How should I know? They're cats." Sergey turned on the dining room light. Why hadn't she thought to do that?

The distance across the room had never felt so long. Sergey and Dawn's bare feet made squishing sounds against the boards.

Their parents lay together, squeezed into the coffin, their expressions the same, their bodies stiff. Despite the Halloween lights, she could tell their skin had taken in a grayish glow.

"Run!" Sergey pushed Olga toward the door. "Get out of here! Run!"

"Oh my gosh!" Dawn whispered.

"Run!" Sergey turned, grabbing Dawn with his free hand. "We'll go to the neighbors. We have to call 911."

Their parents couldn't be dead. It had to be all a trick. Olga stumbled toward the front door and yanked on it.

Locked.

The force jolted her arm and she bit her tongue, tasting blood. She wiggled the lock, but it wouldn't slide over. Sergey was right; they had to get out and call for help. The killer might still be in the house.

The bolt slid over and she turned, just as Dawn shrieked. Her brother's girlfriend shrank against the stairs, one hand to her mouth.

"He's gone." She stared at Olga with widened eyes. "Where is he?"

"He was right here." Olga clutched the doorknob.

The lid to the coffin slammed from the other room.

Olga threw the front door open to a blast of night air, scented with fallen autumn leaves and still damp from yesterday's rain. How could nature stay normal was inside...

"We can't leave him!" Dawn shouted. She shouldn't be so loud. Sergey would be fine. He knew how to protect himself.

"We have to get help. He told us to run." Olga forced herself to leap off the front porch and bolt across the lawn. Wet grass sucked at her feet. She would reach the neighbor's darkened house. She would have to knock, but they would come and she would call for help. Sergey and Dawn would be right behind her.

Her feet slid out from beneath her and she crashed into the muck. Cold wetness stabbed through her pajamas and mud filled her mouth; she turned her head to spit.

The lawn vanished, replaced by something hard, covered in smooth silk. She turned to get up and bumped her head against more of the hardness. Darkness surrounded her, too thick for her to see anything.

"Help!" Her cry echoed back. She reached to the right, and hit more of the prison.

The coffin. Somehow, it had her trapped inside. "*Help.*"

A man's deep tone drifted through the coffin to her ears. "Looks like it finished off these folks too." The funeral director. Olga stiffened.

"How much do you wanna take?" the assistant asked.

"We'll stick the casket in the hearse first, then we'll see what we can fit. The plasma TV looks nice." He chuckled. "Good thing he never questioned giving us cash on that down payment, huh?"

"I think it's better he wanted to keep this thing a surprise." The assistant knocked against the lid of the coffin and Olga yelped, shrinking down into the interior. "No one will even know we were here."

"Help me," Olga screamed, but the coffin swallowed her voice.



## PUMPKIN MASK

*Kevin L. Jones*

Jefferson Thomas hated Halloween; it was the one day of the year that he truly despised. This town had a terrible vandalism problem on that October night and being the principal of the town's one and only high school, he seemed to draw the wrath of every juvenile delinquent in the city. The rest of the year things were fairly quiet in his neighborhood but this one night he would always have trouble, especially when Pumpkin Mask would arrive. Jefferson had named this little hoodlum thusly because every year he would wear the same costume. He had a white sheet covering his body and a jack-o-lantern mask with a leering horrid expression. Lots of kids would screw with their principal on Halloween but Pumpkin Mask would always do something that went far beyond immature pranking. Last year the little punk had thrown a brick through his living room window. The year before that he had spray painted an obscene phrase on his garage door. Jefferson shuddered when he tried to imagine what the little bastard would do this year.

He watched with dread as the sun sank below the horizon, his one ray of hope was that perhaps Pumpkin Mask would not make his annual appearance due to the condition of the road in front of his house. A water pipe had burst and the blacktop and sidewalk in front of his house was under repair. In fact, there was a large sinkhole filled with muddy brown water next to his mailbox. The city workers had covered it with a piece of plywood that had not prevented him from almost falling in and drowning yesterday when he retrieved his mail. He hoped that somehow the torn up street would prevent him from having to spend another Halloween night in torment but he doubted it.

As Jefferson sat in his living room watching *The Shining* on his TV, he peered out of his opened curtains on to his dark yard. He did not have his porch light on, the universal sign that he did not want to participate in handing out candy. He glanced over at his grandfather clock as it chimed, announcing that it was ten o'clock. So far so good. Nothing of note had happened yet. Everything seemed quiet but appearances could be deceiving.

Just when he was beginning to think that for once he just might have a quiet Halloween night, he saw a flaming bag of human feces arc across his

lawn and hit his living room window with a sickening splat. Jefferson leapt up from his couch and threw open his front door. He was going to give these Halloween pranksters a piece of his mind. As he stood there, he saw Pumpkin Mask emerge from behind the large pine tree that sat in the middle of his yard. In the young vandal's hand was a Big Gulp cup fill of urine which he threw it in the startled principal's face. Jefferson stood dripping on his porch, gagging as he spit out a mouthful of the vile liquid.

Jefferson quivered with rage and Pumpkin Mask howled with delight. In between high pitched crackles he shrieked, "Happy Halloween, Principal Douche Bag."

Jefferson felt a fury building up inside him that was unlike any he had ever experienced in his life. He didn't care if he lost his job or even if he went to prison. He was going to beat Pumpkin Mask to within an inch of his life. He dove off the porch towards the startled young man who turned and fled as fast as his legs could carry him. The young hoodlum was much faster and more agile than his pursuer and he would have gotten clean away if he had not run towards Jefferson's mailbox. Pumpkin Mask let out a panicked yelp as he fell through the plywood and down into the sinkhole full of dark brackish water.

Jefferson reached down and threw aside the covering, then he stood at its edge and gazed down at the floundering young man. For a moment Jefferson thought that he would drown until he saw Pumpkin Mask begin to claw his way up the side of the muddy hole towards him. Jefferson extended his leg and kicked the young man square in the middle of the orange mask that he had so come to hate.

Pumpkin Mask flew backwards into the brown water and thrashed frantically as he began to sink beneath its surface. He shrieked up at his principal, "I'm sorry, Mr. Thomas, please help me! I can't swim!"

Jefferson smirked down at the floundering young man. "I'm sorry you can't swim too, you little bastard!"

Jefferson laughed at his own wit as Pumpkin Mask vanished beneath the dark water. Soon his air bubbles vanished and the surface was calm and still. Jefferson whistled merrily as he walked back towards his house.

Surprisingly enough, this Halloween night had been quite enjoyable after all.

## HORROR POEM

*Ken L. Jones*

Spider webs with painted faces  
Pumpkins popping up in the strangest places  
Ghoulish Halloween night flies out of the witch's hat  
And streaks around our head like a vampire bat  
And even an adult can become a scaredy cat  
When there's a haunted house in every jack o lantern  
Doing the Monster Mash all through October  
All this holds sway then like a ghost at dawn it goes away  
But it will return next year just as it should  
When the leaves turn orange in the woodlands and the woods.



## HALLOWEEN BY THE LAKE

*Olivia Arieti*

Melanie's husband heard no reason when he decided to purchase the old cottage, not even his wife's complaints; the house situated by the lake was perfect for fishing and isolated enough for his occasional affairs. Naturally, Melanie's dislike for the place increased his chances of debauchery.

Ironically, when they broke up the cottage was turned over to her; the lawyer did his best to protect his injured client.

Melanie resolved to sell the property; a few days up there to collect the things to bring home before handing it over to the nearest real-estate agent and the matter would be settled.

She had never enjoyed staying in that decayed structure surrounded by woods too thick and hills too high to be called so; most of all the lake looked haunted. The tall reeds stood waving sinisterly while irregular ripples stirred the shady waters; no boat ever lulled on its surface, no fowl flew above. If a lake monster existed it was surely hiding in its turbid depth.

On arriving at destination she remembered that it was Halloween; she hated the festivity and its commercial exploitation of old lore supported by a kitsch taste for the macabre. If it hadn't been such a long drive she would have turned her car round and come back some other time; spending the spooky night up there wasn't inviting at all.

The cottage appeared totally abandoned; withered ivy leaves were hanging from the walls and broken branches had fallen in the garden where weeds and nettles were growing prosperously. The old wooden gate kept swinging back and forth, shrieking ominously.

Luckily the house wasn't big enough to be scary, a bedroom and an attic upstairs, the kitchen and the little living room downstairs. Chunks of wood were still piled by the fireplace.

By a coincidence her last visit there happened to be the previous Halloween; her husband's scary decorations and the jack-o'-lantern conferred a creepy appearance to the whole place; probably, the evil spirits were already lurking in the cottage's darkest corners.

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Since it didn't look like rain, Melanie took a walk in the surrounding woods with the intent of gathering sticks for the fire. She was glad to have no pumpkin to carve or candy to hand out that evening.

By now autumn had made its way through and many trees were barren; a leafy carpet covered the path but the bright medley of its colours had faded; the leaves were dark and damp while the naked boughs above appeared as clammy arms ready to grasp whoever passed by.

The strikes of an axe caught her attention; the sounds were as clear and sharp as to be frightening; not enough, though, to quieten her curiosity.

A few steps ahead she discerned a brawny woodcutter; the guy was half hidden by a huge trunk, his axe swinging menacingly.

"You shouldn't have come, Ma'am," he said with a strange sneer. "This is no place for ladies."

"I was looking for some sticks for the fire, actually," Melanie explained, almost excusing herself for the intrusion and added, smiling, "I remember it's quite cold up here at night time."

"Nothing nastier than the lake's wind." A sinister flash crossed his dark eyes but the tone of the voice was gentle. "You can take those sticks over there, lady."

"My name's Melanie, Mister-?"

"Conor, just call me Conor. I'll let you have some chunks, too."

The fellow started gathering the wood and, with a lustful glare, said, "I'll take them to your place, sweetie." He added, "I know where it is, I live nearby," and headed towards the lake.

Melanie followed him; despite the heavy chunks in his arms, the woodcutter's pace was fast and she almost had to run to keep up with him.

Scary howls and shrieks suddenly resounded behind her; she turned round but nothing was visible in such a mist. When she turned back the stranger was no longer there.

Had she been so absorbed in her thoughts as to have taken a wrong path?

While pondering the possibility, Melanie saw Conor walking in front of her once again.

"Are you playing hide and seek?" she asked, dismayed, but no reply followed.

By the time they got out of the woods, menacing clouds were billowing above and the lake had turned completely white as if a glacial sheet had been laid on the surface.

"The weather changes quite abruptly up here."

"Indeed, those fellows sleeping deep down in the lake know something about it."

Melanie looked at him inquiringly.

"It was quite long ago when suddenly the sky opened and hell's rage poured down and flooded the little village around here. The nearby dam broke and the water buried the living and the dead, all souls alike." With a wicked laugh he added, "the evil and the good as well."

"I've never heard about that."

"Tonight's their night, love; they've been waiting for it all year long."

"Come on now," laughed Melanie nervously, "you really don't think they'll come out of the water."

Once again the woodcutter remained silent.

The thought of a ghost village lying at the bottom of the lake terrified her. Those bodies were sleeping right in front of her house no matter how long ago the event had occurred; now she had her good reasons to believe the lake was haunted.

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Conor helped Melanie place the chunks near the fireplace and offered to kindle the fire. She was hesitant but it was already dark and the idea of remaining all alone frightened her. Besides, despite the abrupt manners, the guy was most attractive.

In a few minutes a blazing fire warmed up the room; strangely, the atmosphere was pleasant.

She had just gone into the kitchen for some coffee when she heard him talking to someone.

"I told you never to show up again!" he shouted.

"We won't let you do it, we won't!" A female voice cried.

A horrible curse followed; then a deep silence dropped on the house. Even the fire had stopped crackling; fastidious sizzles only could be heard as the flames declined.

When Melanie returned the window was wide open; the woodcutter was no longer there. Surely he had gone out to get some other chunks or had disappeared once again.

Not too surprised, she went outdoors to check.

A pitch-black darkness contrasted now with the whiteness of the lake. To her bewilderment she distinguished ghastly figures shifting here and there on its surface as if drifted by unperceivable gusts; a phantasmagorical display of grim shadows trying to fulfil horrid tasks like sawing, sickling, chopping, cutting; the blades of their tools flashing as a lethal promise of doom. In the middle of the lake was an obscure figure, his axe lugubriously swinging back and forth like a pendulum marking the time while the silhouettes of horribly maimed women were swirling around him in a macabre dance of death.

As the woodcutter said, the ghosts of the lake had come out and were living again.

Prey to such a terrifying hallucination, Melanie screamed and instinctively shut her eyes. That creepy place was driving her mad.

When she opened them the lake was still and silent; all shadows had vanished as if ingurgitated by its depth.

Still shuddering, she rushed back to the cottage. If it hadn't been so late she would have jumped into her car and left at once.

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Without the warmth of the fire the room had become cold so Melanie resolved to go to bed. On passing by the mirror, the image of a girl appeared behind her own reflection; the face was disfigured and the eyes betrayed deep hatred; her attire was torn and covered with blood. The lips moved as if trying to say something but Melanie, seized with fright, dashed out of the room, flew down the stairs and ran into the garden. The spirit followed and other spectres thronged out of the darkness; their dresses torn and stained with blood, too; the same agonised rage in the eyes. Their moans rose in a consuming medley, a deafening crescendo that blasted her head and heart.

Had she really become insane?

"Away, away," Melanie cried but the macabre presences remained immobile.

"I don't know what happened to you, I'm sorry, truly sorry, but leave me in peace now," she begged, her hands on her ears, before bursting in tears.

Probably their message would have come through if violent gusts hadn't dissipated them in the thick mist; the night's evil spirits dominated and chased them away.

When Melanie entered the living room, Conor was kindling the fire.

"You have to keep putting sticks in it otherwise it will go out, dear. It's quite obvious you're not acquainted with fireplaces."

Still shaking, but relieved by his presence she mumbled, "My husband used to look after it."

"He shouldn't have walked out on such a nice lady," the woodcutter said as he lifted his eyes and fixed them in hers. They were burning coals; their gaze inflamed her frozen body.

"Too many strange things are happening around here; a girl, followed by others, has just visited me; they were all horribly maimed and covered with blood."

"I warned you, love, no soul can rest in peace tonight." He sneered, "You should have put a jack-o'-lantern in your garden if you had wanted to keep away the bad spirits."

"I've had enough of it, this place is haunted." She was in no mood to joke.

As she pronounced the last word Conor's eyes glowed with sudden wrath and his mouth curled in a horrid grimace. Had she uncovered a dreadful truth?

The woodcutter controlled his fury; the features of his face softened and the grimace was replaced by a reassuring smile.

Unconvinced, Melanie concluded, resolute, "I'm leaving tomorrow morning."

Once again his flaming gaze penetrated hers, "I'll miss you, darling."

His words surprised her; after all they were nothing but casual acquaintances.

By now he was by her side; his strong arms tightened around her and she felt warm and safe.

Before casting a glance up the staircase, he murmured, "I want you to remember me."

Melanie looked at him and silently acquiesced.

She could hear the fire crackling loud while the wind kept whistling and howling as if trying to get through an ultimate warning.

“I was waiting for you, love, too much time has passed since I held such a beautiful girl in my arms,” he whispered as they both lay on the soft patchwork quilt that covered the bed; the mysterious woodcutter’s touch mesmerised her completely.

All of a sudden the wind stopped howling, the fire crackling; passionate cries only resounded from the little bedroom where the two lovers were giving in to insatiable desire.

The cries turned into frightful screams when Melanie saw Conor’s axe swinging over her naked body; his glare was as wild as a madman’s one, his lips were dripping with lust.

She couldn’t know that the handsome woodcutter was the vicious psycho of the buried village.

When dawn broke through all ghosts had retired in the lake’s depth, already craving for the following year’s most ghastly night; Melanie’s horribly maimed corpse only was lying on the shore, waiting for admittance.

THE PROPHECY

Britt Howton

Samantha Brooks killed the engine of her mother's old, faded red Pontiac Sunfire and smiled at her best friend Taylor, sitting in the seat beside her. The car had been handed down to Sam as a sixteenth birthday gift, after her older brother had driven it for years. Sam glanced in the rearview mirror at the dense woods that crowded the narrow, gravel driveway leading up to the house. It felt like they had driven much farther into the middle of nowhere than they had intended to. Of course, the small, rural town of Silver Lake, Indiana wasn't exactly the place to go if you wanted company.

"You scared?" Sam laughed, rolling up the sleeves of her brother's black hoodie. It was two sizes too big and kept falling over her hands. Her short hair, dyed jet black with bright blue streaks, was tucked neatly into a matching black stocking hat. The contrast of her dark hair and clothing made her skin look even paler, almost ghostly, in the moonlight.

"I've been thinking..." Taylor sighed. She and Sam had been best friends since kindergarten and, despite the marked difference in both their looks and personalities, their friendship had remained strong throughout the past twelve years. Taylor looked strangely out of place staring out the window of the weathered old car. She was 5'7, a few inches taller than Sam, with the face and body of a clothing model. She wore a plain black hoodie and dark jeans with her long, straight, sandy-blond hair draped down her back in a low ponytail.

"Don't start that shit," Sam scoffed, rolling her dark gray eyes. "You promised me you'd help."

"I know, I know, it's just... so creepy."

"Halloween is supposed to be creepy."

"Someone died in there, Sam."

"Of old age! Besides, they removed the body," Sam shrugged. "I just want to see what the old guy left behind, before the neighborhood kids raid all the good shit. C'mon, before somebody sees our car and calls the cops." She spun around and pulled a medium-sized black duffel bag from the back seat.

"If there's an Ouija board in there, so help me God..." Taylor muttered under her breath.

“Of course there is!” Sam grinned mischievously. Upon seeing the traumatized expression on her friend's face, she added, “I was supposed to be a joke, princess.”

“Don't call me that.”

“I calls 'em as I sees 'em,” Sam muttered.

They both got out of the car and Sam walked around to the front door of the creepy old house. Some of the windows were missing, others were lined with heavy cardboard from the inside. Some of the shutters were broken and waved back and forth in the wind, as if beckoning them to come inside. Taylor hung back, digging around in her purse in an attempt to delay the inevitable. Large flakes of white paint littered the front porch and the door itself hung slightly ajar. Sam wondered if someone had already broken in and looted the place, or if the wind had simply blown the flimsy thing open.

Sam's older brother Eric, who had recently left for college, had filled them in on the old neighborhood legend years ago. A ninety-six year-old man had lived in the house for decades until he had died a natural death, just over a week earlier. Both adults and children had avoided him like the plague on the rare occasions he left his dilapidated house on the hill, due to his habit of staring at people with a demented, unblinking expression. According to the neighborhood legend, he was responsible for a handful of missing-person cases in the early 1960s. He was allegedly the main suspect in at least three disappearances of young high-school aged girls, but his involvement was never proven, due to lack of physical evidence. Some of the neighborhood kids retold stories of his attempts to trick young women into coming home with him, begging them to help him search for a lost pet somewhere inside. Some of the legends went so far as to imply that the reason there was never any evidence was that the old man was burning the clothes and making a sort of beef stew from the bodies.

“God, you're slow,” Sam griped as she lifted her gaze to the second-story window. “Whoa...” For just an instant, she could have sworn she saw a woman's face in that window.

“Whoa what?” Taylor asked, now waiting at Sam's side.

“Nothing.” Sam didn't want to freak out her friend by mentioning what she might have seen or just imagined. Just to be safe, she pulled a wooden claw hammer from one of the many compartments in her duffel bag.

“Hey, you promised no crazy shit!” Taylor hissed.

“I’m not doing anything. It’s in case there’s some wild animal with rabies living in there.”

“Thanks for giving me one more thing to worry about. So you’re going to play whack-a-raccoon while I’m left defenseless.”

“You could have brought your own.” Sam walked up to the porch and stepped between the two rows of yellow and black barricade tape.

“Why’s the door open?” Taylor asked.

“I don’t know,” Sam sighed, pushing the door the rest of the way open.

“What if someone’s in here?” Taylor whispered.

“I’ll bash their head in.”

They continued silently into the dusty, dark living room. Taylor pulled the door shut behind her and tried a nearby light switch. When it didn’t work, she switched on her flashlight. Sam followed suit and switched her light on too. They couldn’t have them turned on outside for fear that someone would rat them out.

“So what now?” Taylor asked, still standing awkwardly in front of the closed door.

“Look around for goodies.” Sam made her way across the creaking wooden floorboards to the steep, narrow staircase leading up to the second floor. She shined her flashlight up the stairs, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. “Anybody here?” Sam yelled, making Taylor jump in surprise.

They both listened in silence to the whistle of the wind outside.

“Guess not,” Sam muttered, before starting up the flight of stairs.

“Why do we have to go up there?” Taylor whined. “The floor might collapse and we could fall into some torture chamber full of bodies.”

“That would make for an interesting Saturday night,” Sam mused, as she continued her ascent.

When they reached the top of the stairs, they saw the second floor was composed of several rooms separated by one long hallway with a full-length, bronze-plated, antique mirror hanging on the far wall. Sam continued her exploration, shining her flashlight into every doorway and quickly sweeping it over the darkened corners of the room, before continuing on to the next one. Finally, at the end of the hallway, she found what appeared to be the master bedroom.

“Jackpot,” she muttered under her breath, walking over to the mahogany four-poster bed at a slow, calculated pace.

“Why? What were you looking for?” Taylor was practically hanging on Sam's back. She didn't want to go into the room first, but she also hated the unprotected feeling of walking behind Sam, where it felt like something could grab her out of a darkened corner.

Sam suddenly spun around and shone the flashlight on her friend's face. “If you were a creepy old man who may or may not have kidnapped a child and eaten it, where would you hide your best stuff?”

Taylor just gazed at her.

“Okay, you obviously forgot the legend,” Sam sighed, beginning her examination of the bed frame that supported the bare, dusty mattress. She held her flashlight in her mouth as she lifted up a portion of the heavy king-size mattress.

“Ewww, gross, don't touch it!” Taylor begged. “He probably had diseases or bedbugs or something!”

“At least I didn't ask you to do it.”

“Yeah,” Taylor sighed, watching her friend dig around beneath the dingy mattress.

“I think I found something!” Sam announced. She stuffed her flashlight back into her duffel bag and reached her arm's length into the bottom of the bed frame, pulling out an old, faded orange manila envelope.

“Maybe it's full of pictures of his murder victims,” Sam laughed, waving the envelope around in Taylor's face.

“Oh good,” Taylor muttered unenthusiastically. “Can we go now?”

“No way.” Sam used Taylor's flashlight beam to find the clasp on the envelope.

She lifted the ancient paper flap and peered inside. “It's a picture.” She pulled out the photo and hesitated before stuffing it back into the envelope in one swift motion.

“What was it a picture of?” Taylor asked.

“Just a girl.” Sam's demeanor seemed to have changed. She nervously handed the envelope to her friend.

Taylor ran her hand down into the envelope and produced what appeared to be an old, posed Polaroid photograph of a beautiful young girl. She had large, deep-set blue eyes and a pale, slim face framed by long, wavy blonde hair.

“She kinda looks like you, huh?” Sam had her flashlight out again, searching under the mattress for more stuff.

"Yeah, kinda, except my eyes are green." Taylor stared intently at the photo. The girl in the photo looked to be around Taylor and Sam's age, seventeen. "You think it was his girlfriend back in high school?"

"Don't know, don't care," Sam replied.

The envelope still felt heavy in Taylor's palm. She reached in again and this time, she produced a small, silver, heart-shaped pendant. It looked like it would have been worn on a chain, but there wasn't one in the envelope. She studied the photograph again. The girl in the photo was wearing it. "Dude, I found a necklace from the girl in the picture."

"Seriously?" Sam was still digging around beneath the mattress.

"It's cute," Taylor smiled, slipping it into the front pocket of her jeans.

Sam glanced over her shoulder at her friend, expecting her to be wearing the necklace already.

Taylor looked up to see her friend staring at her with a shocked, frozen facial expression.

"Oh shit, Taylor, put it back!" Sam choked out; her face suddenly seemed to grow even paler than usual.

The woman from the window was standing right over Taylor's shoulder. As close as she was standing, it almost looked as though she was whispering in Taylor's ear. She wasn't moving; it didn't even look like she was breathing.

"What is it?" Taylor turned her head slowly to peek over her shoulder, and her breath caught in her throat. It was the girl from the photo, but she wasn't beautiful anymore.

Her long, wavy, blond hair was matted, filthy and hanging over the sides of her pale, hollow cheeks. A deep, bloody gash ran from her right temple to the bridge of her nose. Her mouth hung open in a furious, tormented, silent scream and her black, soulless eyes seemed to bore into Taylor's back.

Taylor averted her gaze and without any sudden movement, located the silver heart pendant and placed it back in the envelope, before placing it on the ground.

"Has she gone?" Taylor mouthed the words to her friend. Sam was sitting silently on the hardwood floor with frightened tears trickling down her face. She slowly shook her head no.

Suddenly, Taylor arched her back as she felt a cold presence on the back of her neck.

Sam stared at the woman, unblinking; for fear that the ghostly creature would act in that split-second alone with Taylor. Taylor's eyes grew wide in horror as she stared straight ahead at Sam. It looked as though the creature's lips were moving, just ever so slightly.

As suddenly as the woman had appeared, she was gone, leaving Taylor and Sam alone once again.

"We have to get the fuck out of here!" Sam leapt to her feet and pulled Taylor by the hand from the room. They ran down the flight of wooden stairs, not even bothering to close the door behind them on their way to the car.

Sam kept glancing over her shoulder as she ran, expecting to see that rotten, bleeding face and blackened eyes staring at them from the doorway. Taylor stared straight ahead silently as she ran; she looked to be in a state of shock. Once they were both safely in the car, Sam squealed out of the gravel driveway and took off down the dark, two-lane highway that led back to her house.

"Did she say something to you?" Sam finally broke the silence in an uncharacteristically timid, quavering tone of voice.

Taylor didn't turn to face her friend, she simply whispered, "She told me I was going to die tonight."

"That was some crazy-ass shit back there," Sam laughed.

She was still laughing as a semi-truck plowed into the passenger side of their car at 70 mph.

THE FINAL HAUNT

R.J. Spears

It was Halloween night. The night of nights. Justin had been afraid he wouldn't be able to pull it off. He started almost too late and had no help. But after fifteen years of entertaining the town with the best amateur Halloween haunted house around, he had no choice - the show had to go on. Uppers and booze had kept him going for the past 72 hours. This would be his best haunt. It had to be.

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"Someone at the front of the line said he's only allowing in small groups at a time," Tony said looking back at the line stringing down and around the block. He, Brittany and Will were nearly at the front of the line with only three groups in front of them.

"I feel sorry for the poor suckers behind us," Brittany said, wiping a strand of luxuriant blonde hair out of her eyes and then wringing her hands in anticipation.

"Look, there's Teresa and Sam," Will said, waving to two of their Kennedy High School classmates at the front of the line. "They must have gotten here really early."

Tony, Brittany and Will were best friends and had been going to Justin Hall's Haunt since they were kids. It was the highlight of their year. Those first few times, they all nearly peed their pants. It was still scary because Justin poured his heart and soul into it every year. Tony still felt the tendrils of fear seeping into his gut, but couldn't admit it because he was a big strong football player. Will maintained the same stone face, but felt a little anxious himself.

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Justin was about to open the doors when he popped another upper and dry swallowed it. It took a few seconds before he felt the surge of energy. His head swam a little when it hit.

He had just put the final touches on first five rooms only an hour earlier and felt that heady anticipation he looked for every year. He had come so close to shutting it down. His wife, Sandy, wasn't onboard this year. She was tired of his obsession. Sick of all the time it took and a bit afraid of his anger when things didn't go 'Just Right.' His kids were usually up for it, but Sandy had poisoned them against him and they refused to help. No matter hard he tried, he couldn't bring them over to his side.

This year he had to go it alone because he had no other choice. He pulled on his Grim Reaper costume, complete with the skull mask and scythe. Sure, some rooms were re-hashes of years gone by, but an encore presentation wasn't a bad thing. It was the last rooms that worried him because there was almost nothing in them. He knew he'd have to improvise.

He went to greet the first visitors, two fresh-faced teenagers from the local high school.

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Brittany watched as the Grim Reaper escorted Sam and Teresa inside and felt a serious pang of jealousy that they got to be the first ones in the door. There was nothing to do, but wait their turn, she told herself. Still, she kicked herself for taking all that time to fix her hair, making them late.

Someone screamed in terror inside the haunted house. Their fear was almost real.

Brittany clutched Tony's arm and practically jitterbugged in the street in anticipation. A true scare junkie, she loved horror movies and anything scary. Visiting this haunted house was the apex of her Halloween week.

The Grim Reaper glided out silently and escorted a middle-aged couple past the fake wrought iron gate and inside. The wait between groups was longer than in years past, but they knew it would be worth it. It always was.

A few minutes later, a chainsaw roared to life and someone inside the Haunt screamed in pure terror. Brittany bounced up and down. "I can't wait. It's got to be the best."

"Calm down, woman," Tony said in a mock chiding tone, hugging her tightly.

"Hey, hey," Brittany said. "Will, call Teresa and Sam. See how they liked it."

Will shrugged, pulled out his cell and punched some keys. Holding the phone to his ear, he waited. After about a minute, he put the phone back in his pocket and said, "They didn't answer."

"We'll be inside soon enough," Tony said.

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Five minutes later, the Grim Reaper slid out of the shadows. His skull mask was dotted with small droplets of fake blood, putting a thrill into Brittany. Silently, he spread his arms and ushered them inside. Brittany clung to Tony's arm, her eyes wide with fear, yet still eager.

The first room was a classic - the mad scientist's lab. A strobe light flashed, illuminating a body on a gurney. Blood-stained sheets covered the body, but a mangled hand stuck out ominously. Electronic equipment clicked, whirred and snapped with electrical current. Every detail was perfect down to the blood soaked surgical instruments.

The next room was a haunted train with skeletons and zombies along for the ride. A vampire floated from the ceiling, dangling on impossible-to-see wires. Sound effects boomed and thundered from a dizzying array of speakers - screams from the train of the damned.

The Mummy room was third, complete with tattered mummy wrappings hanging from the ceiling. A large jackal-headed statue of Anubis leaned in towards the trio, giving Will a start, making him to jump back into Tony and Brittany. An open sarcophagus stood in the corner but there was no mummy walking around to scare the patrons like in the past.

"There's nobody jumping out at us," Brittany whined in Tony's ear.

"I heard he was on his own this year," Tony said.

The next room was a great departure from the other rooms. There were no sound effects or music and no flashing lights, but there was a bad odor in the air. Something wet and coppery with a tinge of decay. Tony felt his stomach lurch, but didn't say anything.

It was a simple graveyard setting with three tombstones and three bodies wrapped with sheets. A blood covered hand stuck out from under one of the sheets. While it was creepy, it wasn't the all-out scare that Brittany was looking for as she shoved her two friends to the next room.

It was a real charnel house complete with blood and dismembered body parts. Open coffins littered the floor with the most realistic corpses Brittany

had ever seen. Each one had vicious wounds that looked fresh. A dismembered arm complete with a bone sticking out of the stump sat in the center of the room. Tony could swear it was twitching.

"Oh yeah, baby," she said, her eyes wide in a combination of fear and excitement.

Just as they were leaving the room, a bloody hand shot out of one of the coffins and clutched Brittany around the ankle. She shrieked and yanked her leg away from the still grasping hand.

A voice came from the coffin, "Help me. Help me."

Brittany pulled away and screamed with utter joy, "Now, that's more like it."

But she got a real let down when they entered the next room. It was completely empty. A dim light filtered in from the previous room, casting the group's shadow, long and thin across the floor.

"What the..." Will started, but was cut off when the Grim Reaper stepped out of the shadows, brandishing his scythe. Brittany thought maybe there was some potential here if the Grim Reaper did something spectacular. Maybe this room could be saved.

The Reaper stood placidly blocking the trios advance.

"What's up, dude?" Will said, trying to be funny.

Before he could say another word, the Reaper put his scythe in a motion. In a flash, the blade cut through the air with a slight whistle. It struck Will in his neck and sheared off his head effortlessly, like a hot knife through warm butter. Will's head bounced off the floor with a dull thud, sending a spray of blood onto both Tony and Brittany's face.

Tony pinwheeled away from the blood spurting out of Will's neck and slammed into a set of blades of jutting blades on the opposite wall. Two of the blades ran through Tony's back and out through his stomach. His mouth opened and closed like a fish gasping for air, blood flowing over his lips, then he slumped forward, his body limp and lifeless. Blood dripped from his now slack mouth.

Brittany stood, eyes wide with shock and terror, when the Grim Reaper's blade sliced through the air again. It cut into her, opening her up from chest to abdomen like a fish being gutted. The blade flew again, completing an "X" pattern across her torso and she fell to the floor. Her entrails spilled out onto the floor and she collapsed onto them, her eyes still open, staring into the nothingness.

Justin pulled off his mask and surveyed his handiwork, nodding his head in approval. An electric thrill coursed through his body. This was just what he needed after losing his job and having his wife file for divorce, threatening to take the two kids. These three teenagers would join his family and the other patrons to help him pull off the best haunt -- ever.

ENDGAME

Neil Leckman

Bags of candy, a popcorn ball
Goblin shrieks, a witch's call
Monsters come, short and tall
Some fly, and others crawl
A celebration for horror geeks
Hope you enjoyed Halloween Shrieks!!

MEET THE AUTHORS

Olivia Arieti: US citizen, high School English teacher who lives in Italy with her family. She has many publications to her name. Her horror stories have recently been accepted by five Static Movement anthology editors.

Brian Barnett, author of Graveyard Scavenger Hunt, lives in Frankfort, Kentucky, with his wife, Stephanie, and his children.

Chad Case's short stories have appeared all over the internet and in several anthologies. He writes mainly horror, but sometimes he dabbles in other genres: paranormal, sci-fi, young adult, romance and comedy. For more info, see his blog: <http://chadcase.blogspot.com/>

Dave Fragments retired to the countryside of Western Pennsylvania amid the deer, squirrels and his imagination to write short stories. He is published in anthologies from Psychopomp, Static Movement, Red Skies Press, Fantastic Horror, Darkened Horizons, and online at The WiFiles, Kalkion, Perihelion, Golden Visions, Tiny Globule, Yankee Pot Roast, and Flashquake. An occasional poem is available but rare. Dave used to conduct research into coal liquefaction and heterogeneous catalysis and that has morphed into horror, Sci-Fi and Fantasy about robots, strange transformations, demons and satyrs, cavorting simians, the Undead, time travel, devilish happenings and Cthulhu visitations.

Britt Howton lives in Dawson Springs, Kentucky and is currently attending Madisonville Community College with a major in Criminal Justice. In her free time, she enjoys writing horror stories and playing guitar.

Mathias Jansson is a Swedish art critic and horror poet. He has been published in magazines as The Horror Zine Magazine, Dark Eclipse, Schlock, The Sirens Call, Apehlion and Trembles Horror Magazine. He has also contributed to several anthologies from Horrified Press, James Ward Kirk Fiction, Source Point Press and other publishers.

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Jeff Jones is originally from the south but now lives in East Anglia with his wife, two grown-up children and a Border collie who is crazy about Frisbee, despite the cliché. Jeff has published two fantasy novels, is currently working on a third and has just had an anthology of some of his prize winning short ghost stories published, called *Tales of terror for a dark night*. He is also the author of over 100 short stories and has been published in many of Static Movement's anthologies.

Ken L. Jones has been professionally active in the world of popular culture for the past thirty years. He has worked as a writer and producer in TV and movies, most notably with Brian Yuzna. He has contributed many short stories and poems to the House Of Horror online magazine.

Kevin L. Jones has been involved with the creative arts for many years and has co-written several comic books. He has contributed several short stories to House of Horror and their anthologies DEADication and Soup of Souls as well as co-authoring the short story collection Mind Rotting Tales available from Panic Press. His work will also be appearing in the upcoming anthologies Dark Dispatches, I Swear This Is True, and Make A Wish.

C.A. Kerr grew up in rural Ontario and now lives in Ottawa, Canada.

Ron Koppelberger is a poet, a short story writer and artist. He has written 103 books of poetry over the past several years and 18 novels. He has been published in The Stray Branch, The Fringe, Write On!!! (Poetry Magazette) Static Movement, Necrology Shorts and Record Magazine. He is a member of The Poet's Society, The Fiction Guild as well as The Isles Poetry Association and The Dark Fiction Guild.

Neil Leckman lives in Colorado with his wife of more than thirty years and only recently began writing seriously. He does it for fun, to share with others and hopes you enjoy the ride.

Vince Liberato often finds inspiration for his stories from his awesome family, his out-of-his-league-but-she-oddly-doesn't-know-it-yet girlfriend, his dog Pony and non-sequitors spoken by friends, colleagues and strangers. He is a huge fan of the macabre, irony and poking fun of conventions in genre. You can read more of his work in the *Demonic Visions* series, Almond Press's *After the Fall: Tales of the Apocalypse*, Third Flatiron Press's *Redshifted: Martian Stories* and Horrified Press's first illustrated anthology: *Tales from the Undead: The Undead in Pictures*. Follow him on facebook and visit his blog at <http://vinceliberato.wordpress.com/>.

Thomas M. Malafarina (www.ThomasMMalafarina.com) is an author of horror fiction from Berks County, Pennsylvania. To date he has published four horror novels "Ninety-Nine Souls", "Burn Phone", "Eye Contact" and "Fallen Stones" as well as four collections of horror short stories; "Thirteen Nasty Endings", "Gallery Of Horror", "Malafarina Maleficarum Vol. 1", "Malafarina Maleficarum Vol. 2" and most recently "Ghost Shadows". He has also published a book of often strange single panel cartoons called "Yes I Smelled It Too; Cartoons For The Slightly Off Center". All of his books have been published through Sunbury Press (www.Sunburypress.com).

Bruce Markuson is married with two children. He lives in Milwaukee WI and has a number of short stories published. Bruce is also working on a series. He enjoys writing and often finds himself with writer's obsession. He says the best way to write is to have an ending then write to that ending. Check out his web site at brucemarkuson@blogspot.com.

Jordan Elizabeth Mierek's short stories and poetry are published in Wagonbridge Publishing's ghost story anthology 13 Haunting Tales, Short Story Me, Danse Macabre, Bewildering Stories, Writing Raw, Dark and Dreary Magazine, Storyhouse, the Magical Library, RiverSedge, and AboutTeens. Her work has won awards in The XPress and Utica Writers Club. She writes monthly for New Hartford Life magazine. She is the current president of the Utica Writers Club and has a Bachelor's degree in elementary education. Jordan maintains a website, JordanElizabethMierek.com and is represented by Belcastro Agency. She enjoys writing short stories as creative exercises and finds great joy in being able to share them with the world.

Misha Murphy lives in Arkansas with her husband, and furbabies. She works full time helping low income families and running her own business. She loves ghost stories and imagining the unknown.

Marija Elektra Rodriguez grew up in a delicatessen, with a multi-ethnic family, where pickling cabbage and knife throwing were taught at an early age. She would scribble stories on butcher's paper which would then be passed on to unsuspecting customers when they received their groceries. She is thirty years old and currently lives in Sydney with her husband (el carnicero), her daughter and pirate pets.

J.J. Smith is a writer and journalist. His fiction has appeared in "The Sterling Web," and online in the now defunct website "Short Horror Stories." His book "Haunted Alexandria & Northern Virginia"

examines ghost lore in Virginia communities. It contains dozens of interviews with people who claim to have had encounters with ghosts. He is married and lives with his wife in Silver Spring, Md.

R.J. Spears lives in Columbus, Ohio and writes mystery/crime and horror fiction. His stories have appeared across the web at Shotgun Honey, Out of the Gutter, the HorrorZine and Flashes in the Dark along with several other sites. His novel, Sanctuary From the Dead, was published by J. Ellington Ashton Press. The first two books in his Forget the Zombie series, Forget the Alamo and Forget Texas, are available on Amazon. You can learn more about his writing at: rjspears.com

Matthew Wilson is a UK resident who has been writing since an early age and lately the terror tales have escaped to various ezines and magazines. He is currently sharing his time between two jobs and one novel.

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**TALES FROM THE MOST FRIGHTENING
NIGHT OF THE YEAR**